

# *Die* VREEMDELING

Durf sy haarself toelaat  
om te hoop?



LYNN AUSTIN

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—LYNN AUSTIN

H · I · D · D · E ·

*A Novel*

P · L · A · C · E ·

*Dared she embrace the hope  
in his unexpected arrival*

# *Die* VREEMDE

Durf sy haarself toelaat  
om te hoop?



LYNN AU

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**Lynn Austin**

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*Hidden Places*

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LYNN AUSTIN has authored several works of fiction, including *Eve's Daughters*, winner of the Silver Angel Award, and the CHRONICLES OF THE KING series. In addition to writing, Lynn is a popular speaker at conferences, retreats, and various church and school events. She and her husband have three children and make their home in Illinois.

“In the life of each of us...  
there is a place,  
remote and islanded,  
and given to endless regret  
or secret happiness.”

—Sarah Orne Jewett

In elkeen van ons se lewe ...  
is daar 'n plek,  
afgesonder soos 'n eiland,  
en oorgegee aan eindelose berou  
of geheime geluk.

~ Sarah Orne Jewett

## PROLOGUE

*Wyatt Orchards*

*November 1930*

**T**hey say everybody has a guardian angel watching out for them, but I'd never needed one half as badly as I did after Frank Wyatt died. Frank was my father-in-law, the last remaining Wyatt man in the whole clan.

My husband's Aunt Betty put the idea of a guardian angel into my head. She said she'd pray for one to come and help me out. The last time I'd given any thought to angels was years earlier in a Sunday school class in one of the many whistle-stop towns my daddy and I passed through in our travels. Daddy always made sure I went to church if we happened upon one on a Sunday morning. That Sunday I was in a Methodist church somewhere in Missouri when the little old white-haired Sunday school teacher said we should always entertain strangers because you never knew if one of them just might be an angel. That's the way she put it— "entertain" them. She made me think I had to juggle balls or do a high-wire act for them, and I wondered what on earth that little old teacher could possibly do that was entertaining, as bent and wrinkled as she was.

So after we laid Frank Wyatt to rest in the family plot beside his wife and two sons, I began hoping God would answer Aunt Betty's prayers soon and that an angel really would show up to help me out. I'd worry about entertaining him once he got here.

"What are you going to do now, Eliza?"

That's what everybody kept asking me after the funeral, and I

hardly knew what to say. What they were really asking was “How’s a scrawny young thing like you, with three little kids to raise, ever going to run a big outfit like Wyatt Orchards?” Especially since I never even stepped one foot on a farm until ten years ago. Of course, they didn’t know about my past—no one in Deer Springs knew, not even my poor dead husband, Sam. I was too ashamed to tell anybody. But people wondered how I was going to manage, just the same. My neighbor, Alvin Greer, was one of them.

“What’re you planning to do, Mrs. Wyatt, now that Frank is dead?”

I filled his coffee cup and handed it to him without answering. Couldn’t he see that I’d buried my father-in-law scarcely an hour ago and that my house was still filled with all the neighbors who had come to pay their last respects and that I didn’t even have time to think? I guess not, because Mr. Greer wouldn’t let up.

“Do you have someone in mind to take over Wyatt Orchards for you, come springtime?” he asked.

I filled another cup and offered it to Reverend Dill, who stood in the serving line behind Mr. Greer. I tried not to let my hands shake too much. I’d learned a long time ago that if you don’t answer right away, most people get antsy and begin filling up the silence themselves, usually by offering you a piece of their own advice. This time Reverend Dill spoke up first.

“Do you have family close by we could send for, Mrs. Wyatt? I don’t believe I ever heard tell where your people are from, exactly.”

“You take cream in that, Reverend?” I asked, offering him the pitcher and ignoring his question.

He shook his head. “No, thanks. I take mine black. You’re not from Deer Springs originally, are you?”

“No. I’m not.” I made myself busy with straightening a pile of teaspoons and checking to see if the sugar bowl needed filling. It was none of his business who my people were or where I came from. This

rambling farmhouse with the well-worn furniture and faded wallpaper was my home now and had been for ten years. My three children and I had a right to live here—with or without Frank Wyatt and his son Sam.

“Of course, there’s no chance you could ever sell this place with the country sunk in a depression like it is,” the reverend added. “The banks have no money to lend.”

“Well, she can’t run the orchard by herself!” Mr. Greer sounded huffy.

I took a step back, trying to excuse myself by pretending the coffeepot needed refilling. Let the two of them argue about my future if it interested them so much. But my husband’s Aunt Betty blocked my escape. Her fingers clamped onto my arm like they were wired with clothespin springs.

“You’re ignoring those busybodies on purpose, aren’t you, Toots?” she whispered. “I do the same thing. If you act dumb, then people think you really are dumb, and they leave you alone.”

Aunt Betty reminded me of a pet parakeet. Her nose stuck out just like a parakeet’s beak and she darted all around like a happy little bird wherever she went. She was tiny and plump. Her fluffy gray head barely reached to my chin, and I was not much taller than a schoolgirl myself. Unlike all the drab old crows in town, Aunt Betty dressed in brightly colored clothing like some rare tropical bird, never caring what the occasion was. Today she wore a flowery summer shift, lacy white gloves, and a broad-brimmed straw hat, as if she were on her way to a Fourth of July picnic, not her brother-in-law’s funeral on a raw November day. I’ve seen her walking her one-eyed dog down the road wearing a bright pink bathrobe and slippers, and I’ve seen her roaming through the orchard in a man’s tweed suit and trousers, too. Sam had always called her “Aunt Batty” behind her back. “*She has a few bats in her belfry,*” he would say, and he’d twirl his finger beside his

head like the spring of a cuckoo clock. My father-in-law had given me strict orders to steer clear of her.

“It’s nobody’s business but yours who you are and where your kin’s from,” Aunt Betty said as she finally unclasped her fingers from my arm. She had a huge straw purse slung over one arm, and she hummed “Joy to the World” as she picked her way around the dining room table, wrapping a chicken leg, two dill pickles, and a slab of spice cake in paper napkins and stuffing them inside her bag. “For later,” she explained with a grin. Grease and pickle juice stained the tips of her white gloves.

Mr. Greer and Reverend Dill finally wandered away from the table, still arguing over what should be done with Wyatt Orchards. I breathed a sigh of relief and went back to serving folks.

“Would you like some coffee, Aunt Betty?” I asked when she finished her tour around the table.

“No thanks, Toots. It would just run out of my purse and onto your nice clean floor.” She laughed like a mischievous child, and I couldn’t help smiling. “By the way,” she added, “no one calls me Betty, don’t you know that? They haven’t for years. It’s *Batty*. My name was changed from Betty to *Batty*. People always get their names changed after they’ve seen God—Abram became Abra-ham, Sarai changed to Sarah, Jacob to Israel....” She paused to sniff a deviled egg before adding it to the collection in her purse. “I’ve seen God, too, you know. I knew it was Him by His eyes.” She clutched my arm again and leaned close to whisper, “God has very kind eyes.”

Now, I had always pictured God’s eyes as sort of tired-looking ever since I heard a Baptist preacher in Kentucky say that the eyes of the Lord ran to and fro throughout the whole earth. But I suppose they could be tired and kind at the same time.

Aunt Batty stood on tiptoes to survey the roomful of people, then tilted her head toward my parlor where a group of church women

stood in a huddle. “You know what those old hens over there are whispering about?” she asked. “They’re discussing how shocked they all are to see me at Frank’s funeral. He was my beau first, you know, before my sister, Lydia, married him. They think I’ve held a grudge all these years, but you know what? I had a guardian angel looking out for me. That’s how I escaped Frank Wyatt—a guardian angel.” She laughed again and dropped a baking powder biscuit into her bottomless purse. “You married my nephew Sam, didn’t you?”

A lump the size of a peach pit suddenly stuck in my throat. I had to swallow it down before I could answer. “Yes...but he’s dead, Aunt Batty. Sam died a year ago, remember?”

Her eyes filled with tears as she stared into space. “My sister, Lydia, had three boys—Matthew was the oldest, then Samuel, then young Willie. Poor little Willie died way back in 1910, wasn’t it? Or maybe it was 1911, my memory never was very good.” She parted the lacy dining room curtains with her gloved hand and pointed to my three children playing in the backyard. “Seems like only yesterday Lydia’s boys were running all around like those youngsters.”

Jimmy, Luke, and Becky Jean had been fidgeting so badly in their Sunday clothes that I’d finally turned them loose to play. I didn’t care if the church women whispered behind their hands about how improper it was for children to be running wild an hour after their granddaddy was laid to rest.

“Those are my three young ones,” I said. “Mine and Sam’s.”

“Well, you look like a mere child yourself,” Batty said, “barely old enough to be a wife, let alone a widow. Poor Sammy. And now his father is gone, too? My, my...I guess that makes me your closest kin here in Deer Springs.” She shook her head, and the black-mesh mourning veil which she had stuck to her straw hat with a piece of sticky tape came loose and fluttered to the floor. “Some folks say this house is jinxed or under a curse, you know. One tragedy after another,

over the years. First little Willie died, then young Matthew left us like he did, then my sister died...But none of those were accidents. I don't care what folks tell you, young lady."

"Not...accidents?" I didn't want to think about what else they could be.

"No, sir! There's a huge load of grief up in the attic of this house. Have you been up there lately? Probably a big pile of it down in the cellar, too."

I watched my children playing tag beneath the clotheslines, and I wanted to tell Aunt Batty that the grief had long-since overflowed the attic and the basement. It was deep enough and wide enough to fill the entire barn.

Aunt Batty squeezed my shoulder. "If you ever need any help shoveling it all out, you give me a call, all right? I live in the cottage down by the pond. What did they say your name was again?"

"Eliza Rose, ma'am. Eliza Rose Wyatt."

Aunt Batty shook her head. "My! That's too much grief for one house to bear." Her purse bumped against my hip as she circled her arm around my waist. "What you need, Toots, is your own guardian angel to watch out for you. Help you out in your time of need. Tell you what—I'll ask God to send you one the next time I see Him, all right?"

I thought of the words my daddy used to say when he tucked me into bed at night—"May the Lord keep His angels 'round about you"—and I had to swallow another big lump.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask for one, Aunt Batty," I said.



# ~ Proloog ~

*Wyatt-boorde*

*November 1930*

Hulle sê almal het 'n beskermengel wat oor hulle waak, maar ek het nog nooit een so nodig gehad soos ná Frank Wyatt se dood nie. Frank was my skoonpa, die laaste oorblywende Wyatt-man in die hele familie.

My man se tannie Betty het die idee van 'n beskermengel by my tuisgebring. Sy het gesê sy sal bid vir een om te kom en my te help.

Die laaste keer toe ek enigsins aan engele gedink het, was jare gelede in 'n Sondagskoolklas in een van die talle klein spoordorpieë waardeur ek en my pa op ons reise gegaan het. Pappa het altyd seker gemaak ek gaan kerk toe indien ons op 'n Sondagoggend naby een was. Ek was daardie Sondag in 'n Metodistekerk iewers in Missouri toe die klein ou gryskop-Sondagskoolonderwyser gesê het ons moet altyd vreemdelinge goed ontvang, want jy weet nie wanneer een van hulle dalk 'n engel is nie.

Nadat ons dus vir Frank Wyatt in die familiebegraafplaas langs sy vrou en twee seuns ter ruste gelê het, het ek begin hoop dat God binnekort tannie Betty se gebede sou verhoor en dat 'n engel werklik sou opdaag om my te help.

“Wat gaan jy nou doen, Eliza?”

Dit is wat almal my ná die begrafnis bly vra het, en ek het nie geweet wat om te sê nie. Wat hulle in werklikheid gevra het, was: “Hoe gaan 'n skraal dingetjie soos jy met drie kinders om groot te maak ooit 'n groot bedryf soos Wyatt-boorde bestuur?” Veral aangesien ek eers tien jaar tevore vir die eerste keer my voete op 'n plaas gesit het. Hulle weet natuurlik niks omtrent my verlede nie – niemand in Deer Springs het geweet nie, nie eens my arme oorlede man, Sam, nie. Ek was te skaam om enigiemand te vertel. Nogtans het die mense gewonder hoe ek sou regkom. My buurman, Alvin Greer, was een van hulle.

“Wat is jy van plan om te doen, mevrou Wyatt, nou dat Frank dood is?”

Ek maak sy koffiekoppie vol en gee dit sonder 'n woord vir hom terug. Kan hy nie sien dat ek my skoonpa skaars 'n uur gelede begrawe het en dat my huis steeds oorloop van al die bure wat hulle laaste eer kom betoon het en dat

ek self nog nie eens tyd gehad het om te dink nie? Seker nie, maar meneer Greer is vasbeslote.

“Het jy al iemand in gedagte om Wyatt-boorde vir jou oor te neem wanneer die lente aanbreek?” vra hy.

Ek maak nog ’n koppie vol koffie en gee dit vir dominee Dill wat agter meneer Greer in die ry staan. Ek doen my bes om my hande so stil moontlik te hou. Ek het lank gelede geleer dat as jy nie dadelik antwoord nie, die meeste mense kriewelrig raak en dan die stilte onderbreek, gewoonlik deur self raad te gee. Hierdie keer praat dominee Dill eerste.

“Het jy enige familie hier naby wat ons kan laat weet, mevrou Wyatt? Ek dink nie ek het jou al ooit hoor sê waar presies jou mense vandaan kom nie.”

“Drink jy melk in jou koffie, Dominee?” vra ek terwyl ek die beker na hom toe uithou, maar sy vraag ignoreer.

Hy skud sy kop. “Nee dankie. Ek drink myne swart. Jy kom nie oorspronklik van Deer Springs nie, nè?”

“Nee.” Ek begin myself besig hou deur ’n hopie teelepels netjies te pak en te kyk of die suikerpot volgemaak moet word. Hy hoef nie te weet wie my mense is of waarvandaan ek kom nie. Hierdie kasarm van ’n plaashuis met sy deurleefde meubels en dowwe muurpapier is nou my huis, soos dit die afgelope tien jaar reeds is. Ek en my drie kinders het die volste reg om hier te bly – saam met of sonder Frank Wyatt en sy seun Sam.

“Daar is natuurlik geen kans dat jy ooit hierdie plek kan verkoop noudat die land in so ’n ernstige depressie is nie,” voeg die dominee by. “Die banke het geen geld om uit te leen nie.”

“Wel, sy kan die boord nie op haar eie bestuur nie,” sê meneer Greer.

Ek staan ’n entjie terug en probeer myself verskoon deur te maak of die koffiepote hervul moet word. Laat die twee van hulle maar oor my toekoms stry indien dit hulle dan soveel interesseer. My man se tannie Betty blokkeer egter my ontsnaproete. Sy gryp my arm styf vas, asof haar vingers wasgoedpennetjies is.

“Jy ignoreer daardie nuuskierige agies aspris, nè, Toots?” fluister sy. “Ek sou dieselfde gedoen het. As jy jou dom hou, dink mense jy is regtig dom en dan los hulle jou uit.”

Tannie Betty herinner my nog altyd aan ’n mak parkiet. Haar neus staan uit net soos ’n parkiet se snawel en sy stap altyd rond soos ’n gelukkige voëltjie oral waar sy gaan. Sy is klein en plomp. Haar kop vol sagte grys hare reik skaars tot by my ken, en ek is self ook nie juis langer as ’n skoolkind nie. Anders as al die vaal ou kraaie in die dorp, trek tannie Betty altyd helderkleurige klere aan soos ’n skaars tropiese voël, ongeag wat die okkasie

is. Vandag het sy 'n blommerige somersuitrusting aan, wit kanthandskoene en 'n breërandstrooihoed, asof sy op pad is na 'n piekniek en nie haar swaer se begrafnis wat op hierdie koue Novemberdag gehou is nie. Ek het haar al met haar eenooghond sien stap met 'n helderpienk kamerjas en pantoffels aan, en ek het haar ook al in die boord sien stap met 'n man se tweedpak met broek en al aan. Sam het haar altyd agter haar rug “tannie Batty” genoem. “*Sy het 'n klap van die windmeul weg,*” het hy altyd gesê en dan sy vinger langs sy oor soos die veer van 'n koekoekhorlosie in die rondte gedraai. My skoonpa het my streng beveel om van haar af weg te bly.

“Dit is niemand anders se besigheid om te weet wie jy is en waar jou mense vandaan kom nie,” sê tannie Betty toe sy uiteindelik my arm laat los. 'n Groot handsak van geweefde strooi hang oor haar arm en sy neurie “Joy to the World” terwyl sy om die eetkamertafel stap, 'n hoenderboudjie, twee agurkies en 'n stukkie speserykoek in papierservette toedraai en dit dan in haar handsak druk. “Vir later,” verduidelik sy met 'n skewe glimlag. Olie en sous vlek die punte van haar wit handskoene.

Meneer Greer en dominee Dill beweeg uiteindelik van die tafel af weg terwyl hulle steeds stry oor wat met Wyatt-boorde moet gebeur. Ek blaas my asem verlig uit en begin weer die mense bedien.

“Wil tannie Betty 'n bietjie koffie hê?” vra ek toe sy haar rondte om die tafel voltooi het.

“Nee dankie, Toots. Dit sal net regdeur my handsak en tot op jou mooi skoon vloer loop.” Sy lag soos 'n ondeunde kind en ek kan nie anders as om te glimlag nie. “Terloops,” voeg sy by, “het jy nie geweet dat niemand my Betty noem nie? Jare lank al. Dis *Batty*. My naam is verander van Betty na Batty. Mense verander altyd hulle naam nadat hulle vir God gesien het – Abram het Abraham geword, Sarai se naam is verander na Sara, Jakob word Israel ...” Sy bly 'n oomblik stil en ruik aan 'n gevulde eier voordat sy dit by die versameling in haar handsak voeg. “Weet jy, ek het ook vir God gesien. Ek het aan sy oë geweet dit is Hy.” Sy vat my arm weer styf vas en leun nader om te fluister: “God het baie vriendelike oë.”

Ek het my God se oë nog altyd ingedink as effens moeg, want ek het eenkeer 'n Baptisteleraar in Kentucky hoor sê sy oë hou die hele tyd al die mense op die hele aarde dop. Tog kan sy oë seker tegelyk moeg en vriendelik wees.

Tannie Batty gaan staan op haar tone sodat sy oor die vertrek vol mense kan uitkyk. Dan kyk sy skeef na my voorkamer waar 'n klompie van die kerk se vroue in 'n groepie staan. “Weet jy waarom daardie klomp henne daar oorkant so fluister?” vra sy. “Hulle praat oor hoe geskok hulle almal is om my

by Frank se begrafnis te sien. Weet jy, hy was eers my kêrel voordat my suster, Lydia, met hom getroud is. Hulle dink ek koester nog al die jare 'n wrok, maar weet jy wat? Ek het 'n beskermengel gehad wat oor my gewaak het. Dit is hoe ek vrygekom het van Frank Wyatt – 'n beskermengel.” Sy lag weer en laat val 'n koekie in haar bodemlose handsak. “Jy is mos met my suster se seun Sam getroud, nè?”

'n Knop so groot soos 'n perskepit kom sit skielik in my keel. Ek moet dit afsluk voordat ek kan antwoord. “Ja ... maar hy is oorlede, tannie Batty. Onthou Tannie nie? Hy is 'n jaar gelede dood.”

Haar oë skiet vol tranes terwyl sy die niet in staar. “My suster, Lydia, het drie seuns – Matthew is die oudste, dan Samuel en dan klein Willie. Arme klein Willie is in 1910 dood, as ek nou reg onthou. Of dalk 1911. Ek het nog nooit 'n goeie geheue gehad nie.” Sy trek die eetkamer se kantgordyn weg en wys na my drie kinders wat in die agterplaas speel. “Dit voel soos gister toe Lydia se seuns soos daardie kleingoed rondgehardloop het.”

Jimmy, Luke en Becky Jean het so krielwrig geraak in hulle Sondagsklere dat ek hulle uiteindelik toegelaat het om te gaan speel. Ek gee nie om as die kerk se vroue onder mekaar fluister oor hoe onbetaamlik dit is vir kinders om rond te hardloop slegs 'n uur nadat hulle oupa ter ruste gelê is nie.

“Dit is my drie kinders,” sê ek. “Myne en Sam s'n.”

“Wel, jy lyk dan self nog soos 'n kind,” sê Batty, “skaars oud genoeg om 'n getroude vrou te wees, wat nog te sê 'n weduwee. Arme Sammy. En nou is sy pa ook weg? Nou toe nou ... Ek skat dit maak my jou naaste familie hier in Deer Springs.” Sy skud haar kop en die swart kant wat sy as sluier met kleefband aan haar hoed vasgeplak het, gaan los en val op die vloer. “Weet jy, party mense hier rond sê hierdie huis is getoor of vervloek. Deur die jare die een tragedie ná die ander. Eers is klein Willie dood, toe is jong Matthew so skielik hier weg en daarna is my suster dood. Niks daarvan was egter ongelukke nie. Ek gee nie om wat die mense jou vertel nie, jong dame.”

“Nie ... ongelukke nie?” Ek wil nie eens dink aan wat anders dit dan kan wees nie.

“Beslis nie! Daar is 'n groot vraag smart in hierdie huis se solder. Was jy onlangs daarbo? Daar is seker nog 'n groot vraag in die kelder ook.”

Ek kyk hoe my kinders aan-aan onder die wasgoeddraad speel en ek wil vir tannie Batty sê dat smart lankal die solder en kelder oorstrom het. Dit is diep en breed genoeg om die hele skuur te vul.

Tannie Batty druk my skouer. “As jy ooit hulp nodig het om dit alles weg te karwei, kan jy op my knoppie druk. Ek bly in die kothuis langs die dam. Wat het jy nou weer gesê is jou naam?”

“Eliza Rose. Eliza Rose Wyatt.”

Tannie Batty skud haar kop. “Aardetjie tog! Dit is te veel smart vir een huis om alleen te dra.” Haar handsak stamp teen my heup toe sy haar arm om my middel sit. “Wat jy nodig het, Toots, is jou eie beskermengel om oor jou te waak. Jou uit te help in jou tyd van nood. Ek sê jou wat ... die volgende keer wanneer ek vir God sien, sal ek Hom vra om vir jou een te stuur.”

Ek dink aan die woorde wat my pappa altyd gesê het as hy my saans in die bed gesit het – “Mag die Here sy engele oor jou laat waak” – en ek moet weer ’n groot knop afsluk.

“Dit sal seker nie skade doen om vir een te vra nie, tannie Batty,” sê ek.

# Wyatt Orchards

*Winter 1931*

“Do not forget to entertain strangers: for thereby some have  
entertained angels unawares.”

HEBREWS 13:2

## CHAPTER ONE

*February 1931*

I had just stepped out the kitchen door into the frozen February night when the stranger startled me half to death. I hadn't heard any automobiles rattling down the long, deserted lane to my farmhouse, so when a shadow in the darkness suddenly turned into the large form of a man, he scared me so bad I dropped a coal scuttle full of ashes down the porch steps. I had to clutch my heart with both hands to keep it from jumping out of my rib cage.

"Forgive me, ma'am. I never meant to frighten you," the stranger said. Even in the dark I could tell he was truly sorry. He had his arm stretched out, like he would gladly catch me if I dropped dead of fright.

"That's okay," I said. "I didn't hear you drive up, is all."

"I didn't drive. I came on foot." He lowered the burlap sack he carried and bent to scoop the spilled ashes back into the scuttle with his hands.

"Careful, those cinders might still be warm."

"Yes, ma'am. Feels good, though." His hands were bare, and he wore no hat—only layers of ragged clothing against the numbing cold. His overgrown hair and bushy beard hid most of his face from view. But it was his odor, the strong smell of unwashed flesh and wood smoke, that told me plain as day that the stranger was a hobo—one of the many thousands that roamed across America looking for work that winter. He must have tramped through the orchard from the railroad tracks, drawn by the light of my farmhouse windows.

“Your house is marked,” old Abe Walker told me the last time I paid a visit to his general store in Deer Springs. “That’s what them tramps do, you know. Once they learn you’re a kindhearted Christian woman, they mark your house for the next fellow. You ought to chase them off, Eliza Rose. ’Tisn’t safe to have them hanging around, you being a widow and all.”

Abe Walker didn’t know that I’d grown up with kinkers and loafers and roustabouts, so I was a pretty good judge of people. I knew who to invite inside and who to send packing.

“May I have a word with your husband, ma’am?” the stranger asked, startling me a second time.

“My...my husband?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was wondering if he had some odd jobs I could do in exchange for a meal.” The tramp had a gentle voice, softspoken, polite. I thought of all the endless chores that needed to be done around here—milk buckets to wash, kindling to split, coal to fetch, animals to feed, fences to mend—and I felt tired clear to my bones.

“Why don’t you come inside and have a bite to eat,” I said. “It’s too cold to stand around out here. Just leave those ashes on the porch.” I turned and opened the kitchen door for him, but he didn’t move.

“I don’t mind eating outside. And I’m willing to do some chores first.”

It was hard to tell how old the stranger was in the darkness. His voice was neither young nor old. I felt sorry for him, though. In spite of his many layers of clothing, he stood hunched against the cold, shivering.

“We just finished our supper,” I said. “The food is still warm. Please come in.”

He slowly followed me inside, then stood close to the kitchen door while I sliced some bread, fetched a clean soup bowl, ladled a helping of leftovers into it, and poured him a cup of coffee. When I turned to



ask him to sit, he startled me once more—for a split second he reminded me of my husband. The stranger was nearly as tall and broad-shouldered as Sam had been, and he stood exactly like Sam used to stand with one shoulder hitched a little higher than the other, his head cocked to one side as if listening for a sound in the distance. Then the moment passed, and I saw how very different from Sam he really was—dark-haired while Sam had been fair, brown-eyed while Sam's eyes had been as blue as a summer sky.

“Won't you sit down?” I asked. I set the bowl of stewed chicken, carrots, and dumplings on the table and passed him the bread.

“Thank you, ma'am.”

I could have sworn I saw the shine of tears in his eyes as he lowered himself into the chair like a very old man. Then he surprised me by folding his hands and bowing his head to pray, just like Sam and his daddy always used to do before they ate.

Across the table from him, my four-year-old daughter gaped at the stranger through wide gray eyes, her fork hanging in the air as she picked at the remains of her dinner. The bare light bulb above the table lit up her coppery hair like flames.

“Quit staring and finish your dinner, Becky Jean,” I said. I didn't mean to sound so cross all the time, but lately my words just seemed to jump out of my mouth that way. I turned back to my sink full of dishes, and when I glimpsed my reflection in the kitchen window, I saw a face that was too harsh, too care-worn for a woman just thirty years old. With all those worry lines and my sandy hair drooping in my eyes, I looked nothing at all like the young girl Sam had once called “pretty as a picture.”

“My mama won't let you leave the table till you eat all your carrots,” Becky told the stranger. “I don't like carrots, do you?”

“Well, yes, miss. As a matter of fact, I like carrots a lot.”

“Want mine?” she asked.

“Oh no, you don’t,” I said. “You finish your dinner, Becky Jean, and let the man finish his.” I planted my hands on my hips, watching Becky like a hawk until she finally bit off a tiny piece of carrot. I could tell by the way the man was shoveling food into his mouth that he hadn’t eaten for quite some time. I dished him a second helping.

“Don’t you want to take your coat off, mister?” Becky asked him a few minutes later.

“No, thank you. It’s hardly worth the bother. I’ll be going back outside in just a bit.” He spoke softly, as if there were a baby sleeping nearby and he didn’t want to wake it. But the mood was broken a moment later by the sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs, jumping from the landing to the hallway floor, then racing into the kitchen. I didn’t need to turn around to know that it was my son Jimmy. He was nine years old, and he galloped like a spring colt wherever he went.

“Mama, can you help me with my—” He froze in the doorway when he saw the stranger. Jimmy’s light brown hair was too long again, hanging in his eyes like a patch of overgrown weeds. I would have to cut it if I could get him to sit still that long.

“It’s not polite to stare, Jimmy,” I said. “Can’t you say ‘good evening’ to our guest?”

“Good evening,” he said. The stranger was caught with a mouthful of dumplings and could only nod in reply. A moment later, a redheaded shadow appeared in the doorway behind Jimmy—seven-year-old Luke. But I knew it would be useless to ask him to greet the man. Luke was as shy and as easily spooked as a stray cat.

“What did you need help with, Jimmy?” I asked, drying my hands on my apron.

“Spelling words.” He skirted the table in a wide arc, as far away from the stranger as he could get, and handed me his notebook. Luke hovered close to his shirttail. The boys’ eyes—as blue as their father’s

had been—never left the stranger. I was trying to decipher Jimmy's smudged writing when the man suddenly let out a yelp. I looked up to see him rubbing the back of his hand.

"Mama!" Jimmy said in amazement, "Becky just hauled off and poked that man with her fork!"

"Poked him?"

"Yeah, for no reason at all!"

"But I did have a reason!" Becky said. "I wanted to see if he was an angel!"

The hobo's dark brows lifted. "A what?"

"An angel," she repeated. She was on the verge of tears. "Mama's always feeding strangers 'cause she says they might be angels. But you wouldn't take your coat off, so I couldn't see if you had wings under there."

I gripped Becky's shoulder, shaking her slightly. "Becky Jean! You say you're sorry right now!" Instead, she covered her face and cried.

"No, no, there's no harm done," the man said. He had a nice smile, his teeth even and white. "I think I know which verse your mother means. It's from the book of Hebrews, isn't it, ma'am? 'Do not forget to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' "

"Yes, that's right." I was so dumbfounded to hear a scruffy old hobo spouting off Scripture like a Sunday preacher that I didn't know what else to say.

Becky wiped her eyes with her fists, then looked up at the man again. "I'm sorry I poked you...but *areyou* an angel?"

"I'm afraid not. Just an ordinary traveling man." He pushed his chair back from the table and stood. "I'm very grateful for the meal, ma'am," he said, bowing slightly. "It was delicious. Now, if there's something I can do for you in return, I'll be glad to do it."

"There's nothing that can't wait till morning. You're welcome to

sleep in my husband's workshop out in the barn. There's a cot and a potbelly stove you can light if you're willing to haul your own firewood. You'll find a lantern and some matches on the shelf inside the doorway."

"Thanks again, ma'am." He lifted his hand as if to tip his hat but his head was already bare. He smiled sheepishly. "Good evening to you, then."

All that evening as I sat at the kitchen table helping Jimmy with his spelling words and arithmetic problems, I heard the hollow *crack* of an ax splitting firewood. Again and again the sound of splintering wood broke the silence, followed by the dull *thunk* of wood dropping to the porch floor as the man stacked it against the house.

"I won't have to chop any wood tomorrow," Jimmy said with a wide grin.

"Sounds like you won't have to chop any wood for a week," I said. "I wonder how he can see what he's doing in the dark."

The stranger didn't stop chopping until after the children were in bed. When I went into the kitchen to adjust the stove damper for the night, I saw his dark outline bending and moving against the white drifts, lifting and flinging the snow high into the air as he shoveled a path to the barn and the chicken coop.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I shivered in the cold as I undressed. I hadn't had much of an appetite since Sam died, and I couldn't seem to keep warm at night unless I wore two pairs of his woolen socks and a sweater over my nightgown. "*You're scrawny as a plucked chicken*," Sam would probably say if he could see how skinny I'd become.

After switching off the light, I peered outside once more from my bedroom window. A wisp of smoke curled from the stovepipe in the workshop, lantern light glowed from inside the barn. But it was only after I lay curled in the cold, empty bed that I realized that I hadn't even asked the stranger his name.

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I had grown so used to being alone on the farm that I forgot all about the hobo until I opened the kitchen door the next morning to fetch some firewood and saw the huge stack of it piled on the porch. I nearly tripped over the scuttle, which he had refilled from the coal bin in the barn and set outside the door. Jimmy and I could walk side-by-side on the path the stranger had shoveled to the barn, and he had even sprinkled it with ashes so we wouldn't slip and fall with the milk buckets. But there was no smoke rising from the chimney in the workshop.

"Looks like our angel flew away again," I said.

"Already?" Jimmy sounded disappointed. "I think he must've been my guardian angel, chopping all that wood like he done." I followed my son into the dim, frosty barn, our breath hanging in the air in front of us. When Jimmy stopped suddenly, I nearly ran into him.

"Wow!" he said. "One man did all this? He must've worked all night!"

The stranger had shoveled all the manure from the stalls—a task I had been dreading—and he'd pitched a fresh supply of hay down from the loft and piled it within easy reach. There was a tidiness and an order to the barn that sent a small shiver down my spine. This was the work of a man who took pride in what he did—the way Sam used to keep things—not the make-do job of a weary mother and her young sons.

"Looks like he knew what to do and just did it," I mumbled.

My eyes burned suddenly, as if smoke had gotten into them. I gave Jimmy a nudge to get him moving. "Come on, now. Quit your gawking and get to work or you'll be late for school."

When we finished milking the cows and feeding the horses, I sent Jimmy into the workshop to make sure the hobo had put the fire out. "And don't forget to close the flue," I warned him.

I'd no sooner unlatched the door to the chicken coop when I heard Jimmy shouting at me from across the barnyard. "Mama!

Mama, come here! Quick!"

"What's wrong?" I hurried to where he stood by the open barn door. His freckles looked gray against his pale face.

"That man is just laying there by the stove," he said breathlessly, "and I can't wake him up!"

A cold chill shuddered through me. *Not again.*

Young Jimmy had been the one who'd found his grandfather lying dead on the barn floor three months ago. I could see the memory of that terrible afternoon in his frightened eyes.

"Oh, that old hobo is probably drunk, that's all," I said with a wave of my hand. "As poor as most tramps are, it seems like they can always get their hands on some liquor if they want to. I'll see to him. You hurry and get ready for school—and make sure Luke doesn't dawdle, either."

I found the stranger huddled on the cot in the workshop, wrapped in a filthy blanket. The slow rise and fall of his chest assured me that he wasn't dead. The room felt cold, the fire long gone out. I glanced around but didn't see any empty liquor bottles. He was probably exhausted from all the work he'd done—work that would have taken the boys and me an entire day to do. I felt a wave of pity for the man and carefully stepped around him to rebuild the fire before returning to my chores. His muscles would ache a lot less if he kept warm.

"Did the angel wake up, Mama?" Becky asked when I returned to the house. She still sat at the kitchen table, poking at her oatmeal in her slow, vexing way. I set the basket of eggs in the sink, then held my hands over the stove for a moment to warm them.

"He's just an ordinary hobo, Becky, not an angel."

"Is he...d-dead?" Luke asked.

"Of course not. You saw all the wood he chopped. The man is

exhausted, that's all."

"He can have my oatmeal if he's hungry." Becky slid off her chair and picked up the bowl with both hands. "Can I take it out to him?"

"No you may not. He'll want bacon and eggs when he wakes up, and your oatmeal had better be in your tummy by then. I'm getting awfully tired of arguing with you over every meal, Becky Jean, especially when there are plenty of children going hungry in this country."

I sent the boys off to school beneath a dismal gray sky that threatened snow. By the time Becky and I finished washing the breakfast dishes and the milk pails, flurries had begun. I mixed a double batch of bread, thinking the stranger might like a fresh loaf to take with him, but when I had it all kneaded and rising in the warming oven, I still saw no sign of him. Leaving Becky with her paper dolls, I pulled on my boots and coat and hiked through the swirling snowflakes to check on him.

"Mister...?" I said, shaking his shoulder. "Hey, mister...you all right?" When he didn't respond, I shook him harder and harder, a sense of panic rising inside me like a flock of frightened birds. "Hey, there! Hey, wake up!" He finally stirred, moaning slightly, and I saw by his glazed eyes and flushed cheeks that it wasn't strong drink or exhaustion that had felled him. It was a fever.

I quickly backed away from him. What if he had something contagious, like polio? My children had been exposed to him last night, Jimmy had been in here this morning, touching him. I quickly tossed a few more logs on the fire, then closed the door of the workshop to let him sleep.

By afternoon the snow was falling thick and heavy. The boys arrived home from school early, stamping the fresh snow from their feet, their cheeks and ears raw from the cold. "The teacher sent us home before the storm gets too bad," Jimmy said.

“And there m-might not be s-school tomorrow,” Luke added. The idea must have excited him; it was the longest sentence he’d uttered in a month.

I ruffled his sweaty red hair before hanging his hat and mittens on the drying bar beside the stove. The smell of wet wool began to float through the kitchen, replacing the aroma of fresh bread.

“Good thing that angel chopped all that wood for me,” Jimmy said. He wiped steam from the kitchen window with his fist as he peered out at the barn. “Did he leave before the storm started?”

“No, he was still in the workshop last time I looked,” I said. “He’s sick with a fever, so I don’t want you boys going anywhere near him, you hear me? In fact, I’d better go check on him myself. I expect he’s hungry by now.” I spooned some of the broth from last night’s stew into a small milk pail and wrapped a slice of but-tered bread in a clean dish towel before bundling up for the trek outside.

The wind had piled the fresh snow into deep mounds, erasing the path to the barn. My feet felt heavy as I plodded through the drifts, and the blowing snow stung as the wind whipped it against my face. The familiar outlines of the farmyard looked like a smudged drawing, while beyond the barn the orchard had vanished in a swirl of gray.

The workshop felt cold again. I knelt beside the stranger’s cot and shook him until he finally awoke. His eyes were glazed, feverish, and I could tell by the panicked look in them that he had no idea where he was.

“It’s okay...you’re in my barn. You came to my farmhouse last night, remember?” He moved his lips, as if trying to speak, but all that came out was a moan. I lifted his head and helped him take a few sips of the broth. “Listen, I need to know what’s wrong with you, mister. I have three children to think about, and I hear there’s all kinds of sickness down in those hobo camps.”

“My leg,” he whispered.



“Your leg? May I see?” He nodded, closing his eyes again. I laid his head down and set aside the broth.

As soon as I lifted the covers off his feet, I saw where the right leg of his trousers had been torn. The fabric was dark and stiff with dried blood. Underneath, he had tied a rag around his leg. I gently unwound the bloodied cloth and saw a jagged cut that ran down his shin from his knee to his ankle. It was swollen and inflamed, festering. He would have blood poisoning at the very least, and I couldn’t bear to imagine the very worst. Once in a lifetime was enough to have witnessed the horror of lockjaw. Angry tears filled my eyes.

“How dare you!” I cried, flinging the blanket over his leg again. “How dare you come crawling to *my*house to die, like some mangy old dog! Haven’t we been through enough? Why couldn’t you have gone on down the road to the next farm or the next town? Someplace that hasn’t had the angel of death camped on their doorstep for as long as I care to recall! How dare you pick *my*house!”

He opened his eyes and looked at me. I couldn’t tell if the tears I saw were his or my own. I covered my face in shame, weeping silently.

“Mama?”

I whirled and saw Jimmy in the doorway behind me. Luke stood beside him, looking frightened.

“I thought I told both of you to stay away from here!”

“Is he going to die, too, Mama?” Jimmy asked.

“He might.”

I stood, wiping my tears on the sleeve of my coat. The old barn creaked as a gust of wind rocked into the side of it; pellets of snow hissed against the windowpane. “We can’t leave him out here,” I said. “We can’t be running in and out all night to tend to him. Go get your sled and help me bring him inside.”

I gripped the man beneath his arms and the boys each took one of

his feet as we dragged him through the barn none too gently, then hoisted him onto Luke's sled. The stranger surely weighed more than the three of us put together. It took a great deal of pushing and shoving to pull him through the deep drifts to the house. He gritted his teeth through most of the jostling but finally cried out as we hauled him up the porch steps. The jolt of pain seemed to rouse him momentarily, and he was able to bear some of his own weight on his good leg as we helped him into Grandpa Wyatt's old bed in the spare room off the kitchen. Becky watched, wide-eyed, from the foot of the bed as we settled him into it.

"Is he going to die?" she asked.

I saw the fear on my children's faces and my anger for the intruder returned. "I don't know. He's in the Lord's hands now. We'll do the best we can for him, but whatever happens is up to God."

I hated my helplessness. I didn't have a telephone and I couldn't drive into town to fetch the doctor because of the storm. *It doesn't matter*, I told myself in an attempt to push away my own fear. I didn't even know this man. Besides, it was likely his own foolishness that had gotten him into this mess.

"He stinks," Becky said, pinching her nose shut.

"He does indeed. Fill up the kettle, Becky Jean, and put it on to boil. You boys help me get him out of these...These rags he's wearing." We stripped him to his tattered long johns and set his clothes outside on the porch. Then I cleaned the wound on his leg as gently as I could and applied a hot poultice, prepared the way the doctor had shown me when he'd treated Sam's injury. The stranger, only half conscious, seemed barely aware of what we were doing.

"We'll leave him be for now," I said after I'd finished. "There's no time to fuss over him with chores to do." I made up my mind to tend to him on my own. The less my children were involved with the stranger, the easier it would be for them if he died. Even so, his

welfare seemed to fill their thoughts that evening— more than the snowstorm, which still raged outside.

“Please don’t let the angel man die,” Becky prayed when she said grace at suppertime. Luke surprised me when he whispered, “Amen.” As for myself, I had no faith in the power of prayer to heal him. God would do whatever He wanted to do, regardless of our feeble pleading.

By the time we finished the evening chores, I felt more exhausted than usual from the added effort of struggling through snow and wind to do them. I waited until after the children were in bed before going back into the stranger’s room with a fresh poultice, dreading what I would find. His eyes were open and I could read the pain in them, even though the only light in the room came from the open door to the kitchen. He shivered in spite of all the quilts we’d heaped on top of him. When I laid the hot cloths on his leg he stiffened, sucking in air through his teeth.

“Sorry. I’m trying to help you, not hurt you.”

“I know,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

“You feeling hungry? I can fetch you something.”

He shook his head. “Just water...please...”

I turned away, suddenly unable to face him. “Listen, I’m sorry for yelling at you like I did out in the barn earlier. It’s just that...” I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering. “It’s just that my husband died from a cut on his foot not even half as bad as yours. The doctor said it was lockjaw. There was nothing I could do but watch him suffer. And...and it wasn’t an easy death.”

“It’s not your fault if I die,” he said softly.

“I know.” I fought back my tears and returned to his bedside, steadying his head while he sipped some water. “What’s your name?” I asked. His answer was a weak whisper I couldn’t understand.

I soaked a washcloth in the basin of soapy water I’d prepared and

washed the grime off his face—something I'd been itching to do since we'd brought him inside. It was hard to tell his age because his shaggy, dark brown hair and beard looked as though they hadn't been cut in a long time. His face was deeply tanned under the layer of dirt, and his eyes, under thick brows, were the color of coffee beans. His calloused hands were large and strong, though warmer to the touch than the bath water. I unfastened the top button of his long johns to sponge his neck and chest and saw a terrible, jagged scar just above his heart. It had long-since healed, but I could tell that he must have dodged the angel of death at least once before.

By the time I finished, the water in the basin had turned black. "I'll let you sleep now," I said before leaving the room.

I carried the basin to the back porch to dump outside and noticed the stranger's burlap sack beside the door. Jimmy had brought it up from the barn and left it there. I lifted it and felt the weight of something heavy on the bottom, then heard the *clank* of metal as I set it on the kitchen table.

I felt like a Peeping Tom as I untied the knot around the mouth of the sack and began digging through his things. But how else was I ever going to find out the stranger's name and where he came from? A pair of mud-caked overalls and a flannel shirt lay on top. I set them aside to wash with his other clothes. Beneath them were a U.S. Army canteen and a well-worn Bible with its front cover torn. Inside a waterproof storm slicker I found a stack of notebooks—the kind Jimmy and Luke carried to school. Penciled writing filled all but one of the notebooks from one marbled cover to the other. Stuffed inside the last one were three letters from the *Chicago Tribune*, addressed to Mr. Gabriel Harper at a post office box in Chicago. I said the name out loud—Gabriel Harper.

I didn't need to dig any further, but I couldn't resist the temptation to find out what the bulky thing on the very bottom of the sack was,

wrapped inside an old blanket. I parted the folds of cloth and stared in surprise.

What an odd thing for a hobo to carry—a typewriter!

# DEEL I

## Wyatt-boorde

*Winter 1931*

Moenie nalaat om gasvry te wees nie, want deur gasvry te wees,  
het sommige mense sonder dat hulle dit geweet het, engele as gaste gehuisves.

Hebreërs 13:2

# ~ Hoofstuk een ~

*Februarie 1931*

Ek het pas by die kombuisdeur uit die ysige Februarie-nag ingestap toe die vreemdeling maak dat ek my byna doodskrik. Ek het nie enige voertuie op die lang, verlate pad na my plaashuis hoor aankom nie.

Toe 'n skaduwee in die donker dus skielik in die groot lyf van 'n man verander, laat hy my so groot skrik dat ek die kolebak vol as op die stoeptrappe laat val. Ek gryp my hart met albei hande vas om te keer dat dit uit my ribbekas spring.

“Vergewe my, Mevrou. Ek wou jou glad nie skrikmaak nie,” sê die vreemdeling. Selfs in die donker kan ek agterkom dat hy werklik jammer is. Hy staan met sy een arm uitgestrek, asof hy my wil vang indien ek dalk van skok dood neerslaan.

“Dis oukei,” sê ek. “Ek het net nie jou voertuig gehoor nie.”

“Ek het nie gery nie. Ek het te voet gekom.” Hy sit die goingsak neer wat hy dra en buk dan sodat hy die gemorste as met sy hande kan terugskep in die kolebak.

“Wees versigtig, van die kole kan nog warm wees.”

“Ja, Mevrou. Die hitte voel goed.” Sy hande is kaal en hy het nie 'n hoed op nie – net lae stukkende klere teen die bitter koue. Sy lang hare en bosserige baard versteek die grootste deel van sy gesig. Tog is dit sy reuk, die sterk reuk van 'n ongewaste lyf en houtrook, wat duidelik vir my sê die vreemdeling is 'n boemelaar – een van die talle duisende wat dié winter deur Amerika reis op soek na werk. Hy het seker van die treinspoor se kant af deur die boorde geloop, aangelok deur die lig in my plaashuis se vensters.

“Jou huis is gemerk,” het ou Abe Walker gesê die laaste keer toe ek by sy algemene handelaar in Deer Springs was. “Dit is wat daardie boemelaars doen. Sodra hulle uitvind jy is 'n goeie Christenvrou, merk hulle jou huis vir die volgende ou. Jy behoort hulle weg te jaag, Eliza Rose. Dit is nie veilig om hulle op jou eiendom te hê nie, veral nie aangesien jy 'n weduwee is nie.”

Abe Walker weet nie dat ek saam met leeglêers en lieplappers grootgeword het nie. As gevolg daarvan het ek eintlik baie goeie mensekennis. Ek weet wie om na binne te nooi en wie om weg te stuur.

“Kan ek asseblief met jou man praat?” vra die vreemdeling en laat my 'n

tweede keer skrik.

“My ... my man?”

“Ja, Mevrouw. Ek het gewonder of hy dalk ’n los werkie of twee het wat ek in ruil vir ’n bord kos kan doen.” Die boemelaar het ’n sagte stem, vriendelik, beleefd. Ek dink aan al die eindelose dinge wat gedoen moet word – melkimmers om te was, hout om te kap, steenkool wat gehaal moet word, diere wat moet kos kry, heinings om reg te maak – en ek voel lewensmoeg.

“Kom gerus in en kry iets om te eet,” sê ek. “Dit is te koud om hier buite rond te staan. Los die as maar eers op die stoep.” Ek draai om en hou die kombuisdeur vir hom oop, maar hy bly doodstil staan.

“Ek gee nie om om buite te eet nie. Ek is ook bereid om eers ’n paar werkies te doen.”

Dit is moeilik om in die donker te sien hoe oud die vreemdeling is. Sy stem is nie jonk of oud nie. Tog kry ek hom jammer. Ten spyte van sy paar lae klere staan hy gebuk en bewoog in die koue.

“Ons het klaar geëet,” sê ek. “Die kos is nog warm. Kom asseblief in.”

Hy volg my stadig na binne en bly dan naby die kombuisdeur staan terwyl ek brood sny, ’n skoon sopbakkie uithaal, sop inskep en vir hom ’n koppie koffie ingooi. Toe ek omdraai en hom wil nooi om te sit, laat hy my weer skrik – hy herinner my vir ’n oomblik aan my man. Die vreemdeling is byna net so lank en breedgeskouerd soos Sam was en hy staan presies soos Sam altyd gestaan het, met die een skouer ’n bietjie hoër as die ander, sy kop effens skuins gedraai asof hy na ’n geluid in die verte luister. Dan gaan die oomblik verby en ek sien hoeveel hy werklik van Sam verskil – donker hare terwyl Sam lig was, bruin oë terwyl Sam se oë so blou was soos die somerhemel.

“Sit, asseblief?” vra ek. Ek sit die bakkie vol gekookte hoender, wortels en kluitjies op die tafel neer en gee vir hom die brood aan.

“Dankie, Mevrouw.”

Ek is seker ek sien trane in sy oë blink toe hy soos ’n baie ou man op die stoel neersak. Dan verbaas hy my deur sy hande saam te vou en sy kop te buig om te bid, net soos Sam en sy pa altyd voor ete gemaak het.

Waar my vierjarige dogter oorkant hom by die tafel sit, staar sy die vreemdeling met haar groot grys oë aan. Sy sit nog met haar kos voor haar en haar vurk bly halfpad in die lug hang. Die gloeilamp sonder ’n skerm wat bokant die tafel hang, laat haar koper hare soos vlamme gloei.

“Hou op staan en eet jou kos, Becky Jean,” sê ek. Dit is nie my bedoeling om die hele tyd so kwaai te klink nie, maar dit voel die laaste ruk of my woorde sommer vanself op dié manier uit my mond spring. Ek gaan terug na my wasbak vol skottelgoed en toe ek my weerkaatsing in die kombuisvenster



sien, sien ek 'n gesig wat te streng is, te afgesloof vir 'n vrou wat maar dertig jaar oud is. Met al die lyne van kommer en my ligte hare wat in my oë hang, lyk ek glad nie meer soos die jong meisie wat Sam eens op 'n tyd “prentjiemooi” genoem het nie.

“My mamma sal nie dat jy van die tafel af opstaan totdat jy al jou wortels geëet het nie,” sê Becky vir die vreemdeling. “Ek hou nie van wortels nie. Hou jy daarvan?”

“Wel, ja, juffrou. Ek hou regtig baie van wortels.”

“Wil jy myne hê?” vra sy.

“Moet dit nie eens waag nie,” sê ek. “Eet jy jou kos op, Becky Jean, en laat die man syne eet.” Ek plant my hande op my heupe en hou Becky soos 'n arend dop totdat sy uiteindelik die laaste krieseltjie wortel eet. Aan die gulsige manier waarop die man sy kos in sy mond druk, kan ek agterkom dat hy lank laas geëet het. Ek skep vir hom nog in.

“Wil jy nie jou baadjie uittrek nie, Meneer?” vra Becky hom 'n paar minute later.

“Nee dankie. Dit is nie die moeite werd nie. Ek gaan tog binnekort weer buitetoë.” Hy praat sag, asof 'n baba iewers lê en slaap en hy nie die kind wil wakker maak nie. Die atmosfeer word egter 'n oomblik later versteur deur die geluid van voetstappe wat daverend met die trappe afkom, van die onderkant van die trap af tot op die gang se vloer spring en dan die kombuis in hardloop. Ek hoef nie om te draai om te weet dat dit my seun Jimmy is nie. Hy is nege jaar oud en hy galop soos 'n jong hings oral waar hy gaan.

“Kan Mamma my help met my – ” Hy steek in die deur vas toe hy die vreemdeling sien. Jimmy se ligbruin hare is al weer te lank en dit hang soos welige onkruid in sy oë. Ek sal dit moet sny ás ek hom sover kan kry om lank genoeg stil te sit.

“Dit is slegte maniere om te staar, Jimmy,” sê ek. “Kan jy nie vir ons gas ‘goeienaand’ sê nie?”

“Goeienaand,” sê hy. Die vreemdeling se mond is vol kluitjies en hy kan net knik. 'n Oomblik later verskyn 'n rooikop-skaduwee agter Jimmy in die deur – die sewejarige Luke. Ek weet egter dit sal nutteloos wees om hom te vra om die man te groet. Luke is 'n skaam kind en skrik net so maklik soos 'n rondloperkat.

“Waarmee het jy hulp nodig, Jimmy?” vra ek terwyl ek my hande met my voorskoot droog vee.

“Met my spelling.” Hy loop om die tafel, so ver as wat hy kan van die vreemdeling af, en gee vir my sy boek. Luke volg kort op sy hakke. Die seuns se oë – net so blou soos hul pa s'n – bly op die vreemdeling gerig. Ek probeer

nog Jimmy se handskrif ontsyfer toe die man skielik uitroep. Ek kyk op en sien dat hy die agterkant van sy hand vryf.

“Mamma,” sê Jimmy verbaas, “Becky het nou net die man met haar vurk gesteeek.”

“Hom gesteeek?”

“Ja, sommer net vir geen rede nie.”

“Maar ek het ’n rede,” sê Becky. “Ek wou kyk of hy ’n engel is.”

Die boemelaar se donker wenkbroue lig. “’n Wat?”

“’n Engel,” herhaal sy. Sy is op die punt om in trane uit te bars. “Mamma gee altyd vir vreemdelinge kos, want sy sê hulle kan engele wees. Jy wil nie jou baadjie uittrek nie, so ek kan nie sien of jy vlerke het nie.”

Ek vat Becky aan die skouer en skud haar liggies. “Becky Jean! Sê onmiddellik jy is jammer.” In plaas van dit te doen, laat sak sy haar kop in haar hande en begin huil.

“Toemaar, dit is niks ernstigs nie,” sê die man. Hy het ’n mooi glimlag, sy tande eweredig en wit. “Ek dink ek weet van watter vers julle ma praat. Dit kom uit Hebreërs, nè, Mevrouw? ‘Moenie nalaat om gasvry te wees nie, want deur gasvry te wees, het sommige mense sonder dat hulle dit geweet het, engele as gaste gehuisves.’”

“Ja, dis reg.” Ek was so stomgeslaan om te hoor hoe ’n slordige ou boemelaar soos ’n prediker teksverse uitryg dat ek nie weet wat anders om te sê nie.

Becky vee met haar vuis oor haar oë en kyk dan weer op na die man. “Ek is jammer dat ek jou gesteeek het ... maar is jy ’n engel?”

“Nee, jammer. Net ’n doodgewone rondreisende man.” Hy stoot sy stoel van die tafel af weg en staan op. “Ek is baie dankbaar vir die ete, Mevrouw,” sê hy en buig effens. “Dit was heerlik. As daar iets is wat ek in ruil vir jou kan doen, doen ek dit met graagte.”

“Daar is niks wat nie tot môre kan wag nie. Jy is welkom om buite in die skuur in my man se werkswinkel te slaap. Daar is ’n bed en ’n stoffe wat jy kan aansteek as jy bereid is om jou eie hout in te dra. Daar is ’n lantern en vuurhoutjies op die rak langs die deur.

“Weereens dankie, Mevrouw.” Hy lig sy hand asof hy sy hoed wil lig, maar daar is niks op sy kop nie. Hy glimlag verleë. “Nou goed dan, goeienag aan julle almal.”

Vir die res van die aand, terwyl ek by die kombuistafel sit en Jimmy met sy spelling en wiskunde help, hoor ek die dowwe geluid van ’n byl wat hout kap. Weer en weer verbreek die geluid van versplinterende hout die stilte, gevolg deur die dowwe stampgeluid van hout wat op die stoep val terwyl die man dit

teen die huis opstapel.

“Ek sal môre nie hoof hout te kap nie,” sê Jimmy met ’n breë glimlag.

“Dit klink of jy vir die volgende week nie hout sal hoof te kap nie,” sê ek.  
“Ek wonder hoe hy in die donker kan sien wat hy doen.”

Die vreemdeling hou eers op kap nadat die kinders in die bed is. Toe ek kombuis toe gaan om die stoof se demper vir die nag te stel, sien ek sy donker figuur wat teen die wit sneeu buk, dit opskep en dan hoog in lug gooi terwyl hy ’n pad oop skep na die skuur en die hoenderhok.

Bo in my slaapkamer bewe ek van die koue toe ek uittrek. Sedert Sam se dood het ek nie juis ’n eetlus nie en ek kan nie in die nag warm word as ek nie twee pare van sy wolsokkies en ’n trui oor my nagrok aantrek nie. “*Jy is so tingerig soos ’n hoender wat se vere uitgepluk is,*” sou Sam waarskynlik gesê het as hy moes sien hoe maer ek geword het. Nadat ek die lig afgesit het, kyk ek nog een keer by my kamervenster uit. ’n Yl rokie krul by die werkswinkel se skoorsteen uit en lanternlig gloei in die skuur. Dit is egter eers nadat ek opgekrul in my koue, leë bed lê dat ek besef ek het nie eens vir die vreemdeling gevra wat sy naam is nie.

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Ek is al so gewoond daaraan om alleen op die plaas te wees dat ek heeltemal van die boemelaar vergeet totdat ek die volgende oggend die kombuisdeur oopmaak om hout te gaan haal en die groot hoop sien wat op die stoep gestapel is. Ek val byna oor die kolebak wat hy in die skuur volgemaak en voor die deur kom sit het. Ek en Jimmy kan langs mekaar in die paadjie loop wat die vreemdeling tot by die skuur oopgeskep het, en hy het as bo-oor gestrooi sodat ons nie met emmers vol melk sal gly en val nie. Daar kom egter geen rook by die werkswinkel se skoorsteen uit nie.

“Dit lyk of ons engel weer weggevlieg het,” sê ek.

“Al klaar?” Jimmy klink teleurgesteld. “Ek dink hy was my beskermengel, aangesien hy al daardie hout gekap het.” Ek volg my seun by die donker, yskoue skuur in en ons asem hang in wasempies voor ons. Toe Jimmy skielik vassteek, loop ek byna teen hom vas.

“Sjoe!” sê hy. “Het een man dit alles gedoen? Hy moes die hele nag deur gewerk het.”

Die vreemdeling het al die mis uit die stalle verwyder – ’n taak waarna ek opgesien het – en hy het ’n vars voorraad hooi van die solder af gebring en dit binne bereik gesit. Daar is ’n netjiesheid en orde in die skuur wat ’n effense

rilling langs my ruggraat afstuur. Dit is die werk van 'n man wat trots is op wat hy doen – soos Sam dinge altyd gedoen het – en nie die lafhartige poging van 'n uitgeputte ma en haar jong seuns nie.

“Dit lyk of hy geweet het wat om te doen en dit sommer gedoen het,” mompel ek. My oë brand skielik, asof rook daarin gewaai het. Ek stamp aan Jimmy sodat hy aan die beweeg kan kom. “Komaan. Hou op ginnegaap en spring aan die werk, anders gaan jy laat wees vir skool.”

Toe ons klaar die koeie gemelk en die perde kos gegee het, stuur ek Jimmy by die werkswinkel in om seker te maak dat die boemelaar die vuur geblus het. “Maak seker jy maak die oonddeur toe,” waarsku ek hom.

Ek het maar pas die hoenderhok se hek oopgemaak toe Jimmy skielik oor die werf na my roep. “Mamma! Mamma, kom hier. Maak gou!”

“Wat makeer?” Ek draf na waar hy by die oop skuurdeur staan. Sy sproete lyk grys teen sy bleek gesig.

“Die man lê net daar by die stoof,” sê hy uitasem, “en ek kry hom nie wakker nie.”

'n Koue rilling trek deur my lyf. *Nie al weer nie.*

Dit was jong Jimmy wat sy oupa drie maande gelede dood op die grond in die skuur gekry het. Ek sien nou die herinnering aan daardie aaklige middag in sy bang oë.

“Ag, daardie ou boemelaar is seker net dronk,” sê ek en probeer hom gerusstel. “Al is die meeste boemelaars brandarm lyk dit of hulle altyd drank in die hande kan kry. Ek sal gaan kyk. Gaan jy in die huis in en maak klaar vir skool, en maak sommer seker dat Luke nie draai nie.”

Ek kry die vreemdeling toegedraai in 'n vuil kombers op die bed in die werkswinkel opgekrul. Die stadige styging en daling van sy bors stel my gerus dat hy nie dood is nie. Die vertrek is koud, die vuur lankal dood. Ek kyk om my rond, maar sien geen leë drankbottels rondlê nie. Hy is seker net uitgeput van al die werk wat hy gedoen het – werk wat my en die seuns 'n hele dag sou gevat het om af te handel. Ek voel skielik innig jammer vir die man en loop versigtig om hom sodat ek vuur kan maak voordat ek aangaan met my eie take. As hy warm bly, sal sy spiere later nie so seer wees nie.

“Het die engel wakker geword, Mamma?” vra Becky toe ek by die huis ingaan. Sy sit nog steeds by die kombuistafel terwyl sy stadig met haar lepel deur haar hawermout roer. Ek sit die mandjie met eiers in die wasbak neer en hou dan my hande vir 'n rukkie bokant die stoof om dit warm te maak.

“Hy is net 'n doodgewone boemelaar, Becky, nie 'n engel nie.”

“Is hy ... d-dood?” vra Luke.

“Natuurlik nie. Julle het tog gesien hoe baie hout hy gekap het. Die man is

maar net uitgeput.”

“Hy kan my hawermout kry as hy honger is.” Becky gly van haar stoel af en tel die bakkie met albei hande op. “Kan ek dit vir hom vat?”

“Nee, jy kan nie. Hy sal lus wees vir spek en eiers wanneer hy wakker word en teen daardie tyd moet jou hawermout in elk geval in jou maag wees. Ek raak regtig moeg daarvoor om elke etenstyd met jou te sukkel, Becky Jean, veral terwyl daar hordes kinders in hierdie land is wat honger kry.”

Ek stuur die seuns skool toe onder ’n somber grys hemel wat dreig om te sneeu. Teen die tyd dat ek en Becky klaar die ontbyt se skottelgoed en die melkemmars gewas het, begin die sneeuvlokkies dwarrel. Ek meng genoeg deeg vir twee brode aangesien die vreemdeling dalk ’n vars brood saam met hom sal wil vat, maar nadat ek dit geknie het en dit in ’n warm oond rys, is daar nog steeds geen teken van hom nie. Ek los Becky om met haar papierpoppe te speel, trek my stewels en jas aan en stap deur die vallende sneeu om te gaan kyk waar hy is.

“Meneer ... ?” sê ek en skud hom aan die skouer. “Hei, Meneer ... Is jy oukei?” Toe hy nie reageer nie, skud ek hom harder en harder, en ’n laag paniek styg soos ’n swerm bang voëls in my op. “Hei, word wakker!” Hy beweeg uiteindelik, kreun sag en ek sien in sy glaserige oë en bloedrooi wange dat dit nie sterk drank of uitputting is wat hom neergevel het nie. Dit is koors.

Ek staan vinnig van hom af weg. Sê nou hy het iets aansteekliks, soos polio? My kinders is gisteraand aan hom blootgestel. Jimmy was vanoggend hier en het selfs aan hom geraak. Ek gooi vinnig nog ’n paar houtte op die vuur en maak dan die werkswinkel se deur toe sodat hy kan slaap.

Teen die middag val die sneeu in digte vlae. Die seuns kom vroeg van die skool af by die huis en stamp die vars sneeu van hulle skoene af, hulle wange en ore rou van die koue. “Die juffrou het ons huis toe gestuur voordat die storm te erg raak,” sê Jimmy.

“D-daar is dalk m-môre nie skool nie,” voeg Luke by. Die idee maak hom seker opgewonde, want dit is die langste sin wat hy in ’n hele maand gesê het.

Ek vryf sy natgeswete rooi hare deurmekaar voordat ek sy mus en handskoene oor die drooigrak langs die stoof hang. Die reuk van nat wol hang gou in die kombuis en vervang die geur van vars brood.

“Dis ook maar goed daardie engel het namens my al die hout gekap,” sê Jimmy. Hy vee die wasem met sy vuus van die kombuisvenster af en kyk uit na die skuur. “Is hy weg voor die storm begin het?”

“Nee, hy was nog in die werkswinkel die laaste keer toe ek gaan kyk het,” sê ek. “Hy is siek met koors, so ek wil nie hê julle seuns moet naby hom gaan

nie, hoor julle my? Om die waarheid te sê, ek moet sommer gou gaan kyk hoe dit met hom gaan. Hy is seker honger teen hierdie tyd.” Ek skep van die vorige aand se sop in ’n klein melkemmertjie en draai ’n sny gebotterde brood in ’n skoon vadoek toe voordat ek myself warm aantrek om buitetoeg te gaan.

Die wind het die vars sneeu op hope gewaai en die pad na die skuur weggevee. My voete voel swaar waar ek deur die hope sukkel en die warrelende sneeu maak seer wanneer die wind dit hard teen my gesig vas waai. Die plaaswerf se bekende buitelyne lyk soos ’n gesmeerde tekening en agter die skuur het die boord agter ’n grys vlag verdwyn.

Die werkswinkel voel weer koud. Ek kniel langs die vreemdeling se bed en skud aan hom totdat hy uiteindelik wakker word. Sy oë is glaserig, koorsig, en ek kan aan die paniekerige blik sien hy het geen idee waar hy is nie.

“Dis oukei ... Jy is in my skuur. Jy het gisteraand na my plaashuis toe gekom. Onthou jy?” Hy beweeg sy lippe, asof hy wil praat, maar net ’n kreun kom uit. Ek lig sy kop en help hom om ’n paar slukkies van die sop te vat. “Luister, ek moet weet wat jou makeer, Meneer. Ek het drie kinders aan wie ek moet dink en ek het al gehoor daar broei allerhande siektes in daardie boemelaarkampe uit.”

“My been,” fluister hy.

“Jou been? Kan ek sien?” Hy knik en maak weer sy oë toe. Ek laat sak sy kop op die kussing en sit die sop eenkant neer.

Die oomblik toe ek die kombers van sy voete af lig, sien ek die plek waar sy broek teen die linkerbeen geskeur het. Die materiaal is donker en styf van die droë bloed. Onder die broek het hy ’n stuk lap om sy been vasgebind. Ek maak die bebloede stuk lap versigtig los en sien ’n rowwe sny oor sy skeenbeen van sy knie tot by sy enkel strek. Dit is geswel en ontsteek, duidelik aan die sweer. Hy sal ten minste bloedvergiftiging hê en ek kan my nie sover kry om die ergste te dink nie. Een keer in ’n leeftyd is genoeg om die verwoesting van klem in die kaak te aanskou. Trane van woede vul my oë.

“Hoe durf jy!” roep ek uit en gooi weer die kombers oor sy been. “Hoe durf jy na my huis toe kom om hier te kom sterf, soos ’n ou rondloperhond! Moes ons nie al genoeg deurmaak nie? Hoekom kon jy nie verder gestap het tot by die volgende plaas of die volgende dorp nie? ’n Plek waar die doodsengel nie op die voorstoep uitkamp vir so lank as wat ek kan onthou nie. Hoe durf jy my huis kies!”

Hy maak sy oë oop en kyk na my. Ek kan nie agterkom of die trane wat ek sien syne of my eie is nie. Ek laat sak my kop skaam in my hande en huil sag.

“Mamma?”

Ek kyk vinnig om en sien vir Jimmy agter my in die deur staan. Luke staan

langs hom, sy gesig bang.

“Ek dog ek het vir al twee van julle gesê om hier weg te bly.”

“Gaan hy ook doodgaan, Mamma?” vra Jimmy.

“Hy kan dalk net.”

Ek staan op en vee die trane met my jas se mou af. Die ou skuur kraak toe ’n windvlaag swaar teen die een kant druk en die sneeu hard teen die venster vas slaan. “Ons kan hom nie hierbuite los nie,” sê ek. “Ons kan nie die hele nag in en uit hardloop om hom te versorg nie. Gaan haal julle slee en kom help my om hom binnetoe te vat.”

Ek tel die man onder sy arms op en die seuns vat elkeen een van sy voete. Dan sleepdra ons hom met moeite deur die skuur en tel hom tot op Luke se slee. Die vreemdeling weeg beslis meer as die drie van ons tesame. Ons moet behoorlik stoot en trek om hom deur die dik laag sneeu en tot by die huis te kry. Hy byt die grootste deel van die tyd op sy tande, maar roep uiteindelik uit van pyn toe ons hom teen die stoep se trappe op trek. Dit lyk of die harde stamp hom vir ’n oomblik bybring en hy kan ’n deel van sy eie gewig op sy gesonde been dra terwyl ons hom tot in Oupa Wyatt se bed help wat in die spaarkamer reg langs die kombuis is. Becky staan grootoog by die bed se voetenent en kyk terwyl ons hom gemaklik maak.

“Sal hy doodgaan?” vra sy.

Ek sien die vrees op my kinders se gesigte en my woede teenoor die indringer keer terug. “Ek weet nie. Hy is nou in die Here se hande. Ons sal vir hom doen wat ons kan, maar wat ook al gebeur, hang van God af.”

Ek haat my hulpeloosheid. Ek het nie ’n telefoon nie, en as gevolg van die storm kan ek ook nie dorp toe ry om ’n dokter te gaan haal nie. *Dit maak nie saak nie*, sê ek vir myself in ’n poging om my eie vrees te onderdruk. Ek ken nie eens hierdie man nie. Dit is in elk geval waarskynlik sy eie dwaasheid wat hom in hierdie gemors laat beland het.

“Hy stink,” sê Becky en knyp haar neus toe.

“Hy stink regtig. Maak die ketel vol, Becky Jean, en laat dit kook. Julle seuns kan my help om hierdie ... hierdie vodde klere uit te trek wat hy aanhet.” Ons trek alles behalwe sy verslete wintersonderklere uit en sit sy klere buite op die stoep. Dan maak ek die wond aan sy been so sagkens moontlik skoon en sit ’n warm kompres op, voorberei soos die dokter my gewys het toe ek Sam se besering behandel het. Die vreemdeling, net halfpad by sy bewussyn, lyk skaars bewus van wat ek doen.

“Ons kan hom nou eers vir ’n ruk los,” sê ek toe ek klaar is. “Dit sal nie help om hier by hom te werskaf terwyl ons ander dinge het om te doen nie.” Ek het reeds besluit om hom alleen te versorg. Hoe minder die kinders met

hierdie vreemdeling te doen het, hoe makliker sal dit vir hulle wees indien hy doodgaan. Tog vul sy welstand hulle gedagtes daardie aand – meer as die sneeustorm wat steeds buite woed.

“Moet asseblief nie dat die engelman doodgaan nie,” bid Becky voor ete. Luke verbaas my toe hy fluister: “Amen.” Wat my aanbetref, wel, ek het geen geloof in die krag van gebed om hom te genees nie. God sal doen wat Hy wil doen, ten spyte van ons kleinmoedige gesmeek.

Teen die tyd dat ons klaar is met die aand se takies voel ek moeër as gewoonlik omdat ek deur die sneeu en wind moes worstel om alles gedoen te kry. Ek wag tot die kinders in die bed is voordat ek met ’n vars kompres teruggaan na die vreemdeling se kamer. Ek vrees wat ek gaan vind. Sy oë is oop en ek kan die pyn daarin sien, selfs al kom die enigste lig in die vertrek van die kamerdeur wat oopstaan. Hy bewee ten spyte van al die kwilte wat ons bo-oor hom gegooi het. Toe ek die warm lappe op sy been sit, verstyf hy en trek sy asem deur sy tande in.

“Jammer. Ek probeer jou help. Ek wil jou nie seermaak nie.”

“Ek weet,” fluister hy. “Dankie.”

“Is jy honger? Ek kan vir jou iets bring.”

Hy skud sy kop. “Net water ... asseblief ... ”

Ek draai weg, skielik nie in staat om hom in die oë te kyk nie. “Luister, ek is jammer dat ek vroeër in die skuur so op jou geskree het. Dis net ... ” Ek knyp my oë toe, onthou. “Dis net dat my man dood is van ’n sny aan sy voet wat nie eens halfpad so sleg soos joune gelyk het nie. Die dokter het gesê dit was klem in die kaak. Ek kon niks anders doen as om te kyk hoe hy ly nie. En ... dit was nie ’n maklike dood nie.”

“Dit is nie jou skuld as ek sterf nie,” sê hy sag.

“Ek weet.” Ek sluk my trane weg en gaan terug na sy bed toe. Ek hou sy kop regop terwyl hy van die water drink. “Wat is jou naam?” vra ek. Sy antwoord is ’n swak fluistering wat ek nie kan verstaan nie.

Ek week ’n waslap in die skottel vol seepwater wat ek voorberei het en vee die vuilheid van sy gesig af – iets wat ek al wou doen vandat ons hom binnetoe gebring het. Dit is moeilik om vas te stel hoe oud hy is, want dit lyk of sy vuil, bruin hare en baard baie lank laas gesny is. Onder die laag vuilheid is sy gesig ’n donker sonbruin en sy oë, wat onder donker wenkbroue sit, is die kleur van koffiebone. Sy geëelte hande is groot en sterk, alhoewel warmer as badwater. Ek maak die boonste knoop van sy vollyf-onderklere oop om sy nek en bors af te spons en sien dan die aaklige, ruwe litteken reg bokant sy hart. Dit het lankal genees, maar ek kan daaraan sien dat die man die doodsengel al een keer tevore ontwyk het.



Teen die tyd dat ek klaar is, is die water in die skottel swart. “Ek sal jou nou los om te slaap,” sê ek voordat ek die slaapkamer verlaat.

Ek dra die skottel na die agterstoep om die water buite uit te gooi en sien dan die vreemdeling se goiingsak langs die deur. Jimmy het dit van die skuur af gebring en dit langs die deur gelos. Ek tel dit op en voel die gewig van iets swaars onderin. Dan hoor ek die geklink van metaal toe ek dit op die kombuistafel neersit.

Ek voel soos ’n loervink toe ek die knoop om die sak se bokant losmaak en deur sy goed begin grawe. Hoe anders gaan ek egter die vreemdeling se naam leer ken en ook uitvind waar hy vandaan kom? Heel bo lê ’n modderbesmeerde oorpak en ’n flenniehemp. Ek sit dit eenkant sodat ek dit saam met sy ander klere kan was. Onder dit is ’n weermag-waterfles en ’n verslete Bybel waarvan die voorblad geskeur is. Binne-in ’n waterdigte sakkie kry ek ’n klompie notaboeke, soos dié wat Jimmy en Luke in die skool gebruik. Almal behalwe een is van voor tot agter met ’n potlood volgeskryf. Binne-in die laaste een is drie briewe van die *Chicago Tribune* geadresseer aan meneer Gabriel Harper by ’n posbus in Chicago. Ek sê die naam hardop – Gabriel Harper.

Ek hoef nie verder te soek nie, maar ek kan nie die versoeking weerstaan om uit te vind wat die swaar voorwerp onder in die sak is wat in ’n ou kombers toegedraai is nie. Ek vou die kombers oop en staar dan verbaas daarna.

Wat ’n vreemde ding vir ’n boemelaar om saam te dra – ’n tikmasjien!

## CHAPTER TWO

I awoke with a crick in my neck and was surprised to discover that I'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table. Outside, the sky was growing light. What on earth was I doing, sleeping downstairs all night? I stumbled to my feet, shivering and confused. Then I saw the notebooks spread out on the table and I remembered.

Simple curiosity had nudged me to open the first notebook and start reading. But in no time at all, the story of Gabriel Harper's travels as a hobo had wrapped me up in some kind of a spell and I couldn't stop. I had added more coal to the fire and kept on reading—devouring four notebooks before finally nodding off. Mr. Harper told tales of hopping boxcars and flatcars, crossing the Mississippi River, chugging over the Rocky Mountains, riding from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, from the Carolina coast to the forests of Washington State. He'd been chased by railroad guards and sheriffs' dogs; he'd eaten from tin cans and garbage pails; he'd slept in barns and in forests and beneath the Milky Way. He told fascinating stories of the other tramps he'd met—young rascals and old-timers, men and women; people with names like “Loony Lou” and “Boxcar Bertha.” Some were down-on-their-luck and looking for work, others were content to live the free-wheeling life of a hobo.

But as interesting as all their stories had been, Gabriel Harper hadn't told his own story, and that's what had kept me reading all night. Who was this stranger who might be dying in my spare room, and what had led him to ride the rails as a hobo? I'd read beautiful descriptions of the many places Mr. Harper had been and the people

he'd met, but I'd learned almost nothing about him.

Feeling guilty, I glanced at the door to the room where he slept, embarrassed to think he might have caught me reading his private journals, if that's what they were. I opened the spare room door a crack and looked in on him. When I was satisfied that he was still sound asleep, I quickly gathered up his things to rewrap in the waterproof slicker. The last notebook in the stack—the only one I hadn't read—caught my eye. Unlike the others, this one had a title written on the cover: *Prodigal Son*.

I recalled a sermon I'd heard in a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, about the prodigal son and how he'd run away and ended up eating with pigs. The story stuck in my mind because of all the P's—Presbyterian and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and prodigal and pigs. That's how my mind remembers things.

Anyway, I couldn't resist opening Mr. Harper's story and seeing if it had any pigs or Presbyterians in it. I started to read:

I hate him. I love him. My only brother.

Simon and I shared the same room, the same childhood, the same father. And while my feelings toward my brother seem clear to me, contradictory as they are, my feelings toward my father aren't nearly as clear. Do I care enough to hate the man? Is it possible to love someone who offers only disapproval and denunciation in return? Have I waited too long to make amends after parting from him in anger? I've decided to return home to find the answers.

I stand beneath the chestnut tree that I climbed so often as a boy—usually to escape my father's rebuke—and stare across the pasture at the farmhouse. It has changed little in the ten years I've been gone except for a fresh coat of whitewash. I've decided to wait until someone emerges from the house before approaching. Better to watch, to try to gauge my father's mood, before announcing my return after

all these years. I was once adept at judging his mood, knowing when it was safe to draw close and when it was wise to steer clear.

But after watching the house for more than an hour, I've seen no sign of life aside from the lazy movements of the hound dog, sprawled in the shade on the back porch. One thing is certain: unlike the biblical tale of the prodigal son, my father isn't watching eagerly for my return. Nor can I imagine him running to me with open arms or killing the fatted calf.

Funny how all those Bible stories I once heard thundered from the church pulpit and proclaimed at the dinner table have stayed planted in my mind all these years. If I lean my head against the chestnut tree and close my eyes, I can clearly recall my disquieting childhood, living beneath my father's iron rule:

I am four years old again, seated at the kitchen table not daring to fidget or squirm, listening to my father's voice as he reads the daily portion from the Holy Scriptures: " 'God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth; the LORD revengeth, and is furious; the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies...The LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet....' "

"Mama...?"

My son's voice startled me. I closed the notebook, guilt-stricken. "Jimmy! Oh, good, you're up. It's time for chores." I lifted the lid on the cast-iron stove and poked the embers, adding kindling and coal.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" Jimmy asked as he approached the table. "Is it the hobo's?"

"Yes...I thought I'd better try and find out who he is and where he comes from. It seems his name is Gabriel Harper."

"Gabriel? Wow, he must really be an angel!" Jimmy picked up the notebook I had been reading, but I snatched it away from him before he could open it.

"I don't think angels are supposed to get sick, Jimmy, and Mr. Harper is very ill." I wrapped the notebooks inside the slicker again and stuffed everything back into the burlap bag.

"Luke thinks the man's gonna die," Jimmy said quietly.

I felt a pang of alarm. "Did he tell you that?"

Jimmy nodded.

"What else did Luke say?"

"Not much," he said with a shrug. "You know Luke."

Sometimes I wondered if I did know Luke. He had been a happy little boy until his father died. Then, for a while, he had looked to his grandfather to take Sam's place. But when Grandpa Wyatt had suddenly died, it seemed as though the little boy in Luke had died along with him.

"Do you think they'll cancel school today?" Jimmy asked, interrupting my thoughts. "It's still snowing."

Outside, the wind still hadn't let up. I could barely see the barn through the gray, swirling flakes. "I don't care if there is school. You're not going any farther than the barn on a day like today."

Jimmy did a little dance of joy as he gathered his hat and mittens from beside the stove and began bundling up to do his chores. Luke wandered into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Guess what, Luke! No school today!" Jimmy announced.

"Is the m-man dead yet?" Luke asked.

His words felt like a knife in my heart. I looked into my son's hollow eyes. "Listen, Luke—" I began, but Jimmy interrupted me.

"Hey, Luke! You'll never guess what the hobo's name is! *Gabriel*... like the angel! And his last name is Harper. Get it? *Harp*... the thing the angels play in heaven?"

I hadn't made the connection until Jimmy pointed it out. Now the stranger's name sounded phony to me. Maybe it was a nickname like my aunt "Peanut" whose real name was Cecilia, or my mama who had

been called “The Singing Angel.” If the hobo was some kind of a writer, maybe Gabriel was his pen name. I shoved my arms into the sleeves of my coat and wrapped a scarf around my head.

“Keep an eye on the fire until we get back, okay, Luke? Throw on more wood if the coal doesn’t catch.”

I was so tired from reading most of the night that I plodded through my chores as if in a dream, my thoughts on Gabriel Harper’s tale of the prodigal son. I wished I’d had time to read more of the story. I could easily picture the prodigal’s father reading about the wrath of God at the dinner table. Grandpa Wyatt had always read from the Bible after dinner, too, allowing no one to leave the table until he’d finished an entire chapter. I’d never seen much point in reading a long list that told who begot whom, or a bunch of rules about priests sacrificing animals and sprinkling their blood every whichway, but I hadn’t dared to question my father-in-law. Like the father in Harper’s story, Grandpa Wyatt was not an easy man to approach. Since his death, the Bible had remained in the bureau drawer in his room. None of my kids had asked me why.

As I trudged out of the barn, lugging a milk pail in each hand, a sudden movement near the back porch caught my eye. Across the wide expanse of white, two dark, hunched forms emerged from the house—one tall, one short. I saw a flash of red—Luke’s hair—and realized that Mr. Harper was leaning on Luke, limping across the yard through the snow toward the privy.

The fool! He was in no condition to be wandering outside in a storm! Suppose he slipped and fell? I hurried toward them as quickly as I dared, the milk sloshing in the pails.

“Hey!” I called. “Hey there! What do you think you’re doing?”

As I had feared, Mr. Harper’s knees suddenly gave out and he crumpled to the ground, pulling Luke down with him. I set the pails down and slogged through the drifts to help. Before I could reach him,

Mr. Harper crawled the last few feet to the outhouse on his hands and knees. Luke was up and brushing snow off his clothes by the time I got there.

“Are you all right, Luke?”

“He f-fell.”

“I know. It wasn’t your fault. He’s much too weak to be out of bed in the first place.”

“He asked me.”

“And it was nice of you to help him, Luke. But you have no business being out here without a hat or mittens. Go back inside now, before you catch your death. I’ll help him.”

I watched Luke plod back to the house, following his own trail of footprints. A few minutes later, the privy door creaked open. Mr. Harper leaned against the door frame, bundled in Grandpa Wyatt’s old coat. My anger boiled over.

“What do you think you’re doing running around outside? We have indoor plumbing upstairs, you know. You *trying* to kill yourself, mister?”

“I needed—”

“If you couldn’t manage the stairs, you could have found what you needed under the bed.”

“I have no right to ask that of you, ma’am. I’m a stranger to you. I don’t have a dime to my name and no way to repay you for what you’ve already done.” His voice was soft, his face very pale. His teeth chattered in spite of the heavy wool coat he wore. He looked so pitiful I quickly swallowed all the harsh words I wanted to shout at him.

“You need to get back inside. Put your arm around my neck and I’ll help you.”

“Thanks. I’m feeling...a little...dizzy.” He closed his eyes and slowly slid toward the ground, leaning against the doorframe. “I’m...sorry...” he mumbled.

“Stay put. I’ll get the boys to fetch the sled.”

It seemed to take forever to load him onto the sled again and haul him the short distance to the house; longer still to wrestle him up the porch steps, through the kitchen, and back into bed. All the while, my anger kept swelling inside me like yeast in a batch of dough. I didn’t know why, exactly. I wasn’t angry at Gabriel Harper—he hadn’t done any harm to me or my kids, only to himself. Why, then, did I feel like throwing things or breaking something? I would have worked out my rage on the woodpile if Mr. Harper hadn’t chopped so much wood already.

Instead, I fixed fried potatoes and scrambled eggs for breakfast, then bundled the kids up once they had eaten and sent them outside to play in the snow, since the storm had finally stopped. I wanted to tend to the stranger’s leg by myself. While I waited for the water to get hot for a fresh compress, I did something I hadn’t done since my husband died—I prayed. Except you couldn’t really call it a prayer, I don’t think, since most of it was just me yelling at God inside my head.

I had asked for an angel, I told Him, and instead He sent me a dying man! Couldn’t He see how upset my kids were by all this dying? It was bad enough that God had taken my husband from me—although I admit I probably deserved to be punished for all the lying I’d done. But what on earth had Jimmy and Luke and Becky Jean ever done to deserve losing their daddy? Or their grandfather? Didn’t God care that Jimmy had to do a man’s share of the work now, or that little Luke barely said two words anymore, or that Becky didn’t eat enough to keep a sparrow alive? Maybe I deserved to be punished, but my three children sure didn’t. This farm was their home, and how in heaven’s name did God expect me to keep it running until they were old enough to run it themselves if He didn’t send me any help?

“And speaking of help,” I told God, muttering the words out loud, “you’d better make up your mind to help that poor, raggedy man laid



up in that bedroom because I won't have him dying on us! I won't stand for it, I tell you! I'm all through begging and pleading for things because you don't seem to hear me when I ask nice. You've got to make him better, you hear? And if he's your idea of an angel, then you'd better send somebody else, mighty quick!"

I'd been making quite a racket, slamming pots and kettles around as I fixed the poultice and cooked some porridge. And I must have still had an angry look on my face when I carried it all into the stranger's room because he was wide awake and gaping at me as if he was afraid I was going to start throwing things at him.

"I'm so sorry for troubling you, ma'am," he said.

"I'm not vexed with you," I replied, trying to smooth the frown off my face. "But you've got to do your level best to get better, you hear me? That means no more running around outside. Now, I've brought you some food and you're going to eat it whether you want it or not, because you can't get better unless you eat. Then I'm going to dab some iodine on that cut of yours and it's going to hurt like the dickens, but you're going to grit your teeth and take it because it's the only way that cut will ever heal, understand?"

He smiled faintly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Don't call me that. You make me feel like a schoolmarm." I felt a smile tugging at my mouth, too. "Now, do you think you can eat this porridge by yourself or shall I feed you?"

"Let me try." He reached to take the spoon from me, and his hand felt hot as it brushed against mine. Drops of sweat glistened on his forehead as he struggled to sit up in bed. When he was ready, I laid the tray with the porridge bowl on his lap and turned my attention to doctoring his leg. From the corner of my eye I could see oatmeal dripping as he tried to feed himself with shaking hands, but I knew enough about men and their stubborn pride to leave him alone.

"Ready for the iodine?" I asked when he'd spooned the last of the

porridge down. He nodded and reached behind his head to grip the brass headboard. I tipped the bottle and, as quickly as I could, poured a thin stream of it down the length of the wound. His body went stiff as he stifled a moan.

“You can yell if you want to, mister.”

“It’s Gabe,” he said through clenched teeth. “My name is Gabe.”

“Well, no one will hear you, Gabe. My kids are outside playing in the snow, and my closest neighbor is Aunt Batty, who lives way down by the pond. I’m going to put on a fresh compress now, then I promise I’ll leave you alone.”

I tried to be gentle, but I could tell by the funny way he was breathing that his leg pained him a lot. Maybe talking would help take his mind off it.

“Care to tell me how you did this?” I asked.

He drew a ragged breath. “I was running to catch a slowmoving flatcar. I’ve done it a hundred times before, but the railroad guards were after me and I didn’t want to end up in jail for vagrancy. I ripped my leg open on a jagged piece of the undercarriage as I jumped. It was dark and I didn’t see it sticking out.”

“How long ago did it happen?”

“I don’t know...how long have I been here?”

“You spent a night in my barn and a night in this bed.”

He exhaled. “It must have been two or three days before that...I’m not sure. I lose all track of time being on the road without a calendar or a clock.”

He had a smooth, deep voice that rumbled like the low notes on a church organ. Yet his words seemed to settle in the room as softly as snowflakes falling. I glanced at him, longing to ask why someone who spoke as fine as he did and who could make words come alive when he wrote them down on paper had to ride the rails like a worthless tramp. He was still gripping the headboard, his eyes closed. I quickly

finished wrapping his leg.

“There. All done.”

When he opened his eyes I handed him a towel so he could wipe off the sweat that ran down his face. He looked as white as flour.

“Need anything else?” I asked as I gathered up my things.

“Yes...I need to thank you, Mrs. Wyatt.”

“Well, then, you can thank me by getting better.”

I was almost through the door when the thought struck me. For the life of me, I couldn’t recall telling him my married name. I slowly turned to face him. “How did you know my last name?”

His gaze shifted away and for a split second he wore the same look Jimmy gets when I catch him with his hand in the cookie jar. Then the moment passed and he smiled weakly. “I read the sign outside and I just assumed...”

“Oh. Of course.”

I knew the sign he meant. A long time ago, in better, happier days, my father-in-law had painted on the side of the barn: *Wyatt Orchards —Frank Wyatt & Sons, Proprietors*. I shuddered to think that Frank Wyatt and his sons were all gone.

“It is Mrs. Wyatt...Isn’t it?” he asked shyly.

“Yes, but you can call me Eliza.”

I had just put away the iodine and things, when all of a sudden my three kids came thundering through the back door with their boots on, scattering clumps of snow everywhere.

“Mama! Mama! Come quick! You gotta come!” They all tugged on my skirt and jabbered at me at the same time.

“Stop it! You’re getting my floor all wet! Look at this mess!” I tried to herd them back out onto the porch, but they weren’t listening to me. From the way they carried on, I began to think something terrible must have happened. “Slow down, one at a time. Let Jimmy tell me what’s wrong.”

He was breathless from running. “We were sliding down the hill behind Aunt Batty’s house when she came outside and asked us to help her shovel snow. She said she would pay us and everything. So we followed her over to her house and she kept calling me Matthew even though I told her my name was Jimmy—”

“Is she a witch?” Becky asked suddenly.

“No, of course not,” I said. “Who told you that?”

She looked up at Jimmy.

“It was a joke,” he said, giving Becky a shove. “Anyway, I thought she wanted us to shovel a path to her outhouse or something, but she said no, we had to shovel out the snow that was *inside* her house.”

I remembered how my father-in-law used to insist that Aunt Batty was crazy, warning us to stay away from her, and I groped for a way to explain her to my kids. “Listen, you need to understand that Aunt Batty is—”

“But, Mama, she was right! The snow *is* inside her house!”

“*Inside!* How on earth did it get there?”

“I don’t know, but you gotta come. There’s way too much for me and Luke and Becky to shovel out by ourselves.”

As I pulled on my coat and an old pair of Sam’s boots, I decided that maybe Aunt Batty’s door had blown open during the storm and the snow had drifted inside. But as soon as I reached the top of the rise behind her house I saw that it wasn’t the case at all. The entire roof of her kitchen had fallen in from the weight of the snow like the top of an undercooked cake. The kitchen looked like it had been added some years after the original stone cottage was built, and its roof was not as steeply pitched—or as well-made.

We walked around to the front door and Aunt Batty let us in. I had never been inside her cottage in all the years I’d lived up in the big farmhouse, and I stood in her front parlor and stared. It was neat and cozy, with the ruffled curtains and crocheted afghans you’d expect in

an old spinster's house. But every inch of wall space in the entire cottage was lined with shelves—and every inch of shelf space was crammed with books. It looked to me like Aunt Batty owned more books than the Deer Springs Library. I even saw a long row of thin yellow spines on a bottom shelf that had to be National Geographic magazines. A rocking chair stood beside the coal stove along with a big console radio with a plant perched on top.

What looked to have once been the dining area now held an enormous wooden desk, the kind you'd see in a fancy bank or a lawyer's office. It even had one of those swivel chairs beside it with a black leather seat. The typewriter sitting on top of the desk was much bigger and fancier than the one in Mr. Harper's burlap sack.

The house was freezing inside, and tiny little Aunt Batty looked as though she had on every sweater and coat she owned. "Did you bring the matches, Toots?" she asked.

I frowned. "Matches...?"

"Yes, I asked young Matthew there to bring me some. I keep mine in the kitchen and I won't be able to get to them until we finish the shoveling. My fire went out, you see, and Winky and the girls don't like it when the house gets this cold."

I figured Winky must be the disagreeable little dog that had been yapping and snarling at us ever since we arrived, scaring poor Becky half to death and making her cling to my leg like a monkey. But I didn't see any "girls." From where I stood, though, I could see into the demolished kitchen and I realized right away that there was no way Aunt Batty could close off that part of the house and keep the heat in the parlor and bedroom. And she certainly wouldn't be able to fix any meals in that kitchen. The plain truth was that her house was uninhabitable.

I knew what had I had to do, and it made me feel as though the roof had just caved in on me. I drew a deep breath and rested my hand on

her arm, speaking as slowly and carefully as I could. “Aunt Batty, shoveling out all that snow isn’t going to help. Neither are matches. You still won’t be able to stay warm or cook your food. Your kitchen roof has caved in. Do you understand that? You can’t live in this house until the roof gets fixed.”

“The roof? Oh my! I don’t believe I own a ladder that’ll reach to the roof! I’ll have to borrow one—”

“No, listen. You’ll have to *hiresomeone* to repair your roof. It’s a huge job, Aunt Batty. I can’t do it and neither can you. In the meantime, until it’s fixed...” I paused, wishing that I wasn’t Aunt Batty’s closest kin, wishing that I didn’t already have an invalid to take care of, wishing I had never asked God to send me another angel. “In the meantime, you can come and live in the farmhouse with the kids and me.”

“My sister Lydia’s house?”

“Yes.” I lacked the energy to explain to her that Lydia, my mother-in-law, had died like all the rest of them. Besides, Aunt Batty would probably just forget all over again. Added to my worries about Mr. Harper dying, I felt like I had more troubles than Job’s wife.

“Oh dear,” she moaned. “I can’t leave Winky and the girls here all alone.”

I gritted my teeth. “Winky can come, too.”

“But Frank Wyatt hates dogs. He won’t allow one in his house.”

“Frank Wyatt is dead. It’s my house now.” Aunt Batty stared at me as if she had just heard the shocking news for the first time, as if she had never even been to his funeral three months ago. What was the Good Lord trying to do to me?

“Can I help you pack a few things to bring along?” I asked gently.

She smiled. “Why, yes. Thank you, Toots.”

We went into her tiny bedroom and I helped her toss some clothes and underthings and toiletries into a scruffy carpetbag that was

probably last used during the War Between the States. Aunt Batty added her knitting and an old photograph in a brass frame, then glanced around the room.

“There, now. I guess that’s all I need. And you’re sure that Winky and the girls are welcome, too?”

I nodded grimly.

“I’ll have to wake the girls up. They won’t like having their nap disturbed, but it can’t be helped.”

I still saw no sign of any “girls.” I wondered if Aunt Batty had imaginary friends like my Becky Jean did. But then she pulled back the quilt on her bed and I saw that what I had mistaken for lumps in an old feather bed were really two enormous cats that had burrowed down like moles beneath the quilts.

Becky squealed in delight. “Oh, look—kitty cats!” She crawled up on Aunt Batty’s bed and pulled off her mittens so she could pet them. “Do they have names?”

“Yes, that one is Queen Esther and that’s Arabella.”

They were both tiger-striped—Esther in shades of gray and Arabella in orange—with splashes of white on their chests and faces. They stretched and yawned and blinked their yellow eyes sleepily at Aunt Batty.

“Come on, girls. Rise and shine,” she said. “I’m afraid we have to move someplace warm for a few days.”

I wanted to believe that it would only be for a few days, but I knew in my heart that it would likely be much longer. Even if we could find a carpenter who would come all the way out here in this snow, I doubted if he could get much work done on the house until the weather warmed up. It looked to me like Aunt Batty’s entire kitchen would have to be rebuilt.

“Now, then,” she said. “Would you children like to help me?”

We’ll let Samuel carry this satchel, and Matthew can—” “I’m

Jimmy,” he said. “And he’s Luke.”

“Oh, that’s right. Young Matthew went off to France to fight in that awful war, didn’t he?” She gave Luke the carpetbag, then bent to snap a dog leash onto Winky’s collar. She held out the other end to Jimmy.

“Does your dog bite?” he asked warily. Winky hadn’t stopped snarling since we’d arrived.

“Heavens, no!” She bent over the little dog and said sternly, “Now, that’s quite enough of that, please.” Winky whined and lay down on the rag rug with a sigh.

“I’ll carry Queen Esther,” Aunt Batty continued, “because she can be a bit crotchety after her nap. And your mother can carry Arabella.”

“What about me?” Becky asked.

“Oh, you’ll have a very important job to do, Toots. You must carry my friend Ivy.”

I was afraid to ask who Ivy was, but she turned out to be the sprawling ivy plant on top of the radio in the parlor. Aunt Batty nestled the pot in Becky’s arms, draping the trailing vines around her shoulders like a wreath so they wouldn’t drag on the ground. “I hope you have a radio. Ivy loves listening to the radio.”

“No, ma’am,” Jimmy said solemnly. “Grandpa Wyatt wouldn’t allow one.”

“Well, then, I suppose we’ll just have to sing to her instead. Can you children sing?”

“I guess so,” Jimmy said with a shrug, though I couldn’t recall ever hearing any of my kids sing.

“Splendid!” Aunt Batty replied. She returned to her bedroom and rolled each cat over onto its back, then swaddled it in a blanket like a baby. She handed the orange one to me before picking up the gray one herself. Neither cat protested this undignified treatment—but then, they were both so enormously fat it would have been hard for them to put up much of a fight. Aunt Batty glanced wistfully around



the cottage one last time before we all headed out the door.

I can't even imagine what a sight we made, parading single file up the hill through the snow drifts to the farmhouse, all of us bundled to our eyebrows in hats and scarves and carrying a wornout carpetbag, two lumpy cats, a stubby misshapen dog, and an overgrown ivy plant. As we trudged along, I wondered how to explain the bedraggled-looking man in the spare bedroom to Aunt Batty. In the end I decided to let her think he was whomever she wanted him to be—she could call him President Hoover for all I cared. I would have my hands full reminding her that Luke and Jimmy weren't my dead husband and his older brother. Next she would be calling me Lydia.

As it turned out, Becky pointed to the closed spare room door as soon as we got inside the kitchen and said, "We have to be real quiet because there's an angel sleeping in there. He's sick."

Aunt Batty held a finger to her lips and nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world for people to have an ailing angel asleep in their house. We unwrapped the two cats and they waddled away like they knew exactly where they were going. Becky and Aunt Batty found a new home for Ivy in the parlor. And as soon as we unleashed Winky he sauntered up to the rug I kept by the kitchen stove, circled it three times, then fell over onto his side in the middle of it as if he'd been shot between the eyes. A minute later he was snoring. I longed to lie down beside him but it was already lunchtime and I still hadn't even washed the breakfast dishes.

"Becky Jean, take Aunt Batty upstairs and show her your room," I said. "She'll have to sleep with you for a couple of nights since my spare room is already occupied—that is, if it's all right with you, Aunt Batty."

"That will be just fine and dandy, Toots," she said with a wave of her hand. "I can sleep just about any old place."

"And you're not *really* a witch, are you?" Becky said, as if to reassure

herself.

“I should say not! The Bible says that God hates witches...and since God is a good friend of mine, I certainly can’t be a witch!”

“Jimmy just made that up to scare me, didn’t he?”

“I expect so,” Aunt Batty replied as they headed toward the stairs. “I never had a brother myself, but I do know that little boys love to tease little girls.”

I threw some food together and called it lunch. Afterward, when I went into Mr. Harper’s room to bring him some, I found him moaning and burning up with fever again. I sent Jimmy outside to fill a basin with snow and I soaked washcloths in it to lay on Mr. Harper’s face and neck to bring the fever down. I spent most of the afternoon doing that, along with changing the poultices on his leg to draw out the poison and tending the stoves and cleaning up the dishes and boiling some navy beans to make soup for our supper.

I heard the kids bundling themselves up while I tended to Mr. Harper, and they disappeared outside with Aunt Batty for a while. They all came trudging up the hill from her cottage an hour or so later, lugging something on Luke’s sled. I didn’t give it much thought, worried as I was about Mr. Harper.

Later, as I chopped carrots and onions to add to the navy beans, I heard the kids entertaining Aunt Batty in the parlor—or maybe she was entertaining them, it was hard to tell. The mysterious bundle had turned out to be a pile of books, and the kids paged through them with her, spellbound as they gazed at the colorful pictures.

Meanwhile, Winky woke up from his nap and decided to attach himself to me. Every time I took a step he was tangled underfoot. He had to be the ugliest dog I had ever seen, with stumpy legs and splayed feet and a tail like a stubby thumb. His short, white fur bunched in lumpy rolls in some places and wrinkled like a cheap suit of clothing in others. He had a bulldog’s body but his head was all

wrong. Instead of a smashed-in face, he had a regular dog's long tapered snout—and his tongue didn't seem to fit inside it so his jaw hung open most of the time, lolling and slobbering. Or if he did manage to close his snout, the tip of his pink tongue stuck out like a rude child's.

Winky was blind in one eye, and his good eye kept winking all the time, like it had a mind of its own. Every time I took a step, that one-eyed dog stepped with me, grinning foolishly and winking at me as if we'd just shared a private joke.

Next my kitchen towels started disappearing. I always kept one hung on a hook near the sink, but when I reached for it to dry my hands, it was gone. I took out a clean one and hung it there, but by the time I'd finished setting the table for supper, it was missing, too. I found them both behind the stove where the orange cat, Arabella, had dragged them. I watched her for a moment as she pawed and nosed the cloth around until it was just so, and it was clear that she was making a nest for herself back there. I groaned.

"Is there any chance that Arabella might be about to give us a litter of kittens?" I asked Aunt Batty during supper.

"Not a chance, Toots. She just thinks she's going to. I figure it's quite impossible." Aunt Batty blushed so fiercely I decided not to pursue it. I just hoped she was right. Things had turned crazy enough around here without a litter of kittens thrown in.

Afterward, when the boys and I started bundling up to do our chores, their mittens were missing, too. My frustration mounted as we searched and searched. I had neither the time nor the patience for this nonsense.

"You boys know you're supposed to hang your wet mittens here by the stove to dry," I scolded.

"But I *did* hang them there," Jimmy insisted. "Honest, I did."

"Then why aren't they there? Mittens don't just sprout wings and

fly away, do they?"

"Here they are!" Luke suddenly shouted. He pointed to Arabella's nest behind the stove and I couldn't believe my eyes. The cat lay sprawled on her side like a nursing mother with the mittens snuggled up against her like babies. I lost my temper.

"You stupid cat!" I yelled. "Those are *mittens*, not *kittens*!"

Aunt Batty patted my shoulder. "You won't convince her, Toots. Arabella is a little hard-of-hearing, you know. The two words sound the same to her."

"Well, she isn't blind! Can't she see they're not kittens?"

Aunt Batty smiled faintly. "We all see what we want to see. And Arabella, bless her soul, longs to be a mother."

When I came back inside after my chores I found the other cat, who was half the size of a lion, all sprawled out on my rocking chair in the parlor, smug as you please, as if she owned it. When I tried to move her so I could sit down for a few minutes' rest, she hissed at me.

"That Queen Esther can be just as mean as a snake sometimes," Aunt Batty explained as she shooed the cat off my chair. She lowered her voice to a stage whisper and added, "It's because she knows Arabella is prettier than she is."

Frankly, I couldn't see much beauty in either one of them, fat as they were. And as I said, Winky was no prize, either. He sat drooling on Aunt Batty's feet all evening, watching her knit.

"Where did you find him?" I finally asked.

"Oh, Winky found me. He arrived at my door early one morning like an angel sent from heaven. I kept a flock of chickens at the time, and I needed a good watchdog to chase away the foxes and the raccoons. We've been good friends ever since."

"What kind of a dog is he?" Jimmy asked.

"Winky is a hunting dog."

I nearly laughed out loud. All the hunting dogs I'd seen were sleek,

long-legged, graceful creatures, not fat lumpy things that waddled around on splayed feet with their tongues sticking out. I pictured the deer falling over dead from hysterics at the sight of him.

“That’s how he lost his eye,” Aunt Batty explained. “In a hunting accident.”

“Couldn’t you find it again?” Becky asked.

“Oh, it didn’t fall out like a marble, Toots. He lost the use of it. He’s blind in that eye.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “He doesn’t like to talk about it.” Winky rested his muzzle on Aunt Batty’s foot, as if he understood that we were talking about him. She bent to pat his head. “He’s a good dog, my Winky.”

“What was his name before the accident?” I asked.

“Oh, he was always called Winky.” Aunt Batty got a far-away look on her face. “Sort of prophetic, don’t you think?”

I nodded, wondering how long it would be before I was as crazy as she and her pets were.

I got the kids to bed and Aunt Batty settled in Becky’s room and the fires dampened for the night before returning to Mr. Harper’s room one last time. I admit I felt scared to go in there. He’d been doing so poorly all day I thought he surely must be about to die. It’s hard taking care of someone who’s gravely ill because your natural instinct is to nurse him back to health, and when he gets worse and dies you feel like it’s all your fault. Maybe you should’ve done something differently, maybe you could’ve done something more.

I took a deep breath, telling myself not to get too attached to him, then went into his room. He was burning up with fever and so delirious he was out of his mind. I knew he’d reached a crisis point—tonight he would either live or die. I bathed him in cold rags until he shivered, then wrapped a bed sheet tightly around him so he’d stop thrashing. Most of his words made no sense, but when he started crying “Father...Father, I’m sorry....” it sent chills up my spine. I didn’t

know if he was calling for his daddy or for his heavenly Father. It made me think about my own daddy, and I wondered if he ever thought about me.

Then Mr. Harper began to weep, and it was such a brokendown sort of weeping that I sat on the edge of the bed and took him into my arms and held him until he stopped. "Forgive me, Father," he said over and over as he clung to me. "Please, please forgive me...."

That's how it went for most of the night. I changed the dressings on his leg, using up an entire bottle of iodine, and tried to keep him cool. He needed a doctor, no question about it, but I couldn't drive anywhere in all this snow. I felt helpless. It was just like when Sam died all over again, except there hadn't been any snow when Sam had gotten sick and nothing but Frank Wyatt's stubbornness to keep me from driving to town to fetch the doctor. I'd finally walked all the way into Deer Springs to get help for Sam, but it was too late.

I couldn't do anything else for Mr. Harper, either, but I wanted him to know that someone cared, that he wasn't all alone. It must be a terrible thing to die all alone and unloved like my father-in-law had. I pulled a chair close, held Mr. Harper's burning hand, stroked his brow, and dropped water onto his tongue with a spoon. I talked to him about my own life, and I cried for Sam all over again because taking care of Mr. Harper brought it all back— how Sam had suffered so horribly, how he never should have died.

Then a miracle happened. Way past midnight, Mr. Harper's fever finally broke. He stopped moaning and thrashing and fell peacefully asleep. I needed some sleep, too, but as I crawled into my own bed early that morning, I couldn't stop my tears.

I had stepped off the train in Deer Springs ten years ago because I'd wanted to take control of my life, to find the home and the family I'd longed for. But now my life had veered wildly off course like a team of runaway horses, and I no longer held the reins in my hands. I

thought about praying, then said aloud, “No. I’m not asking for any more angels. They’re too much work!”

I’d been waiting for God to send someone to help me for months now, but I guessed He must be hard-of-hearing. I was all alone, isolated from town, holed up with snow piled to the windowsills—and yet I didn’t want the snow to melt because I had no idea in the world how I would run Wyatt Orchards all by myself come springtime. I had a houseful of people to tend—three grieving kids, a dying hobo, and a crazy old lady with her lunatic pets— yet I still felt like I was all alone.

As I lay in the darkness, feeling sorrier and sorrier for myself, wishing I had someone to keep me company, I heard the click of a dog’s toenails on the wooden floor. The ticking sound moved up the hallway, into my bedroom, across my floor. I peered over the edge of the bed. Winky stood in a pool of moonlight, slobbering and grinning up at me. It was the last straw.

“You don’t belong up here!” I said in an angry whisper. I waved my arms at him. “Go on, go back downstairs!”

I didn’t think that fat old thing could jump, but that’s exactly what he did—jumped right up onto my bed.

“No! Bad dog! Get off!”

Winky lay down beside me where Sam used to sleep and rested his head on my knee. There was something about the weight of his stubby little body, the warmth of him, that was oddly comforting. I didn’t really want him to go.

“All right, then,” I said sternly. “But just for tonight.”

He lifted his head to look at me and winked.

## ~ Hoofstuk twee ~

Ek word wakker met 'n stywe nek en ontdek tot my verbasing dat ek by die kombuistafel sit en slaap. Dit begin buite reeds lig word. Wat op aarde doen ek om die hele aand hier onder te sit en slaap? Ek kom sukkelend orent, bibberend van die koue en deurmekaar. Dan sien ek die notaboeke wat uitgesprei op die tafel lê, en ek onthou.

Ek het uit suiwer nuuskierigheid die eerste notaboek oopgemaak en begin lees. Toe het die verhaal van Gabriel Harper se reise as 'n boemelaar my vinnig in die een of ander betowering gewikkel en ek kon nie ophou lees nie. Ek het nog steenkool op die vuur gegooi en aanhou lees – 'n hele vier notaboeke voordat ek uiteindelik aan die slaap geraak het.

Meneer Harper vertel stories van skuddende goederewaens wat die Mississippirivier kruis, oor die Rocky Mountains rammel, van die Kanadese grens tot by die Golf van Mexiko ry en van die kus in Carolina tot in die woude van die staat Washington. Spoorwegwagte en polisiehonde het hom gejaag; hy het uit blikkies en van ashope af geëet; hy het in skure en woude en onder die oop sterreheem geslaap. Hy vertel fassinerende verhale van die ander boemelaars wat hy ontmoet het – jong latte én ringkoppe, mans en vroue; mense met name soos “Loony Lou” en “Boxcar Bertha”. Party het werklik teëspoed beleef en was op soek na werk, ander was tevrede met die ongebonde lewe van 'n boemelaar.

Al is hulle onderskeie verhale ook hoe interessant, vertel Gabriel Harper nie sy eie verhaal nie, en dít is wat gemaak het dat ek byna die hele nag deur gelees het. Wie is hierdie vreemdeling wat dalk in my spaarkamer kan sterf en wat het hom gedryf om as 'n boemelaar met treine deur die land te reis? Ek het pragtige beskrywings gelees van die talle plekke waar meneer Harper was en die mense wat hy ontmoet het, maar ek kon byna niks oor hom uitvind nie.

Ek voel skuldig en kyk na die deur van die vertrek waar hy lê en slaap, verleë om te dink dat hy my kon betrap het waar ek sy persoonlike joernale lees, indien dit is wat dit is. Ek maak die spaarkamer se deur op 'n skrefie oop en loer in. Toe ek seker is dat hy steeds vas slaap, maak ek vinnig sy goed bymekaar en bêre dit weer in die waterdigte sak. Die laaste notaboek – die een wat ek nie gelees het nie – vang my oog. Anders as die res is daar 'n titel voor op dié een geskryf: *Die verlore seun*.

Dit herinner my aan 'n preek wat ek in 'n Presbiteriaanse kerk in



Pittsburgh, Pennsilvanië, gehoor het oor die verlore seun en hoe hy weggeeloop en op die ou einde saam met die varke geëet het.

Die verhaal het in my gedagtes vasgesteek as gevolg van al die P's – Presbiteriaans, Pittsburgh, Pennsilvanië. Dit is maar hoe my verstand dinge onthou.

In elk geval, ek kan myself nie keer nie en maak meneer Harper se storie oop om te kyk of dit enige varke of Presbiteriane inhet. Ek begin lees:

Ek haat hom. Ek is lief vir hom. My enigste broer.

Ek en Simon het 'n kamer gedeel, ons kinderjare en ook dieselfde pa. Alhoewel my gevoelens teenoor my broer vir my duidelik is, al is dit teenstrydig, is my gevoelens teenoor my pa nie naastenby so duidelik nie. Gee ek genoeg om om die man te haat? Is dit moontlik om lief te wees vir iemand wat in ruil net afkeuring en veroordeling aanbied? Het ek te lank gewag om dinge reg te maak nadat ek in woede van hom af weg is? Ek het besluit om huis toe te gaan en antwoorde te vind.

Ek staan onder die kastaiingboom waarin ek dikwels as seun geklim het – gewoonlik om van my pa se teregwysing af weg te kom – en staar oor die weiveld na die plaashuis. Behalwe vir 'n nuwe laag wit verf het dit min verander in die tien jaar wat ek weg was. Ek besluit om te wag totdat iemand uit die huis kom voordat ek sal nadergaan. Dis beter om die huis dop te hou, my pa se bui te probeer peil voordat ek ná al die jare my terugkeer aankondig. Daar was 'n tyd toe ek sy bui goed kon vasstel; toe ek geweet het wanneer ek nader kon gaan en wanneer ek liever moes wegbly.

Ek hou die huis vir langer as 'n uur dop, maar sien geen teken van lewe nie; net die lui bewegings van die hond wat op die agterstoep in die skaduwee uitgestrek lê. Een ding is seker: Anders as in die Bybelse verhaal van die verlore seun wag my pa nie gretig op my terugkoms nie. Ek kan my ook nie indink dat hy my met oop arms tegemoet sal hardloop of die vetgemaakte kalf sal slag nie.

Dis vreemd hoe al daardie Bybelverhale wat ek dawerend van die preekstoel af gehoor of waarna ek by die etenstafel geluister het al hierdie jare in my gedagtes gewortel bly. As ek met my kop teen die boom se stam leun en my oë toemaak, kan ek duidelik my kinderjare in herinnering roep toe ek onder my pa se ystervuis moes leef:

Ek is weer vier jaar oud. Ek sit by die kombuistafel en kan dit nie waag om te vroetel of rond te skuif terwyl ek na my pa se stem luister waar hy die daaglikse gedeelte uit die Heilige Skrif lees nie: “'n Jaloerse God en 'n wreker is die Here, 'n wreker is die Here, en vol grimmigheid; 'n wreker is die Here vir sy teëstanders, en Hy behou die toorn teen sy vyande. Sy weg is in warrelwind en in storm, en wolke is die stof van sy voete.”

“Mamma?”

Ek skrik en maak die notaboek skuldig toe. “Jimmy! Mooi, jy is wakker. Dit is tyd om ons werkies te doen.” Ek lig die ysterstoof se deksel op en roer die gloeiende kole. Dan gooi ek 'n paar dun houtjies en nog steenkool in.

“Waar kom al hierdie goed vandaan?” vra Jimmy toe hy nader aan die tafel kom. “Is dit die boemelaar s'n?”

“Ja ... Ek het gedink ek moet maar probeer uitvind wie hy is en waar hy

vandaan kom. Sy naam is Gabriel Harper.”

“Gabriel? Sjoë, hy is dalk regtig ’n engel.” Jimmy tel die notaboek op waaruit ek gesit en lees het, maar ek gryp dit vinnig by hom voordat hy dit kan oopmaak.

“Ek dink nie engele is veronderstel om siek te word nie, Jimmy, en meneer Harper is baie siek.” Ek draai die notaboekke weer in die waterdigte sakkie toe en druk alles terug in die goiingsak.

“Luke is seker dat die man sal doodgaan,” sê Jimmy sag.

Ek word yskoud. “Het hy dit vir jou gesê?”

Jimmy knik.

“Wat het Luke nog gesê?”

“Nie veel nie,” sê hy en trek sy skouers op. “Ma ken vir Luke.”

Ek wonder soms of ek werklik vir Luke ken. Hy was ’n gelukkige klein seuntjie totdat sy pa dood is. Toe het hy vir ’n tyd na sy oupa gekyk met die hoop dat hy Sam se plek sal vul. Toe Oupa Wyatt egter skielik dood is, het dit begin lyk of die klein seuntjie in Luke saam met hom gesterf het.

“Dink Mamma hulle sal die skool vandag gesluit hou?” vra Jimmy en onderbreek my gedagtes. “Dit sneeu nog.”

Buite waai die wind nog steeds. Ek kan skaars die skuur deur die grys, vallende vlokkies sien. “Ek gee nie om of die skool oop is of nie. Op ’n dag soos vandag gaan julle beslis nie verder as die skuur nie.”

Jimmy doen ’n klein vreugdedansie voordat hy sy hoed en handskoene vat waar dit langs die stoof hang. Dan begin hy warm aantrek om sy werkies te gaan doen. Luke drentel by die kombuis in en vee die slaap uit sy oë uit.

“Raai wat, Luke! Ons gaan nie vandag skool toe nie,” kondig Jimmy aan.

“Is die m-man al dood?” vra Luke.

Sy woorde steek soos ’n mes deur my hart. Ek kyk in my seun se leë oë. “Luister, Luke – ” begin ek, maar Jimmy val my in die rede.

“Hei, Luke, jy sal nooit raai wat die boemelaar se naam is nie. *Gabriel* ... soos die engel. Sy van is Harper. Vang jy dit? *Harp* ... die ding waarop die engele in die hemel speel?”

Ek het nie die konnotasie gemaak totdat Jimmy dit uitwys nie. Nou klink die vreemdeling se naam vir my vals. Dalk is dit ’n bynaam, soos my tannie “Peanut” wat eintlik Cecilia is, of my ma wat altyd “Die singende engel” genoem is. As die boemelaar ’n skrywer is, is Gabriel dalk sy skrywersnaam. Ek druk my arms by my jas se moue in en draai ’n serp om my kop.

“Hou die vuur dop totdat ons terugkom, Luke. Gooi nog hout op as die steenkool nie vlamvat nie.”

Ek is so moeg nadat ek byna die hele nag deur gelees het dat ek werk asof

ek in 'n droom beweeg, my gedagtes die hele tyd by Gabriel Harper se verhaal van die verlore seun. Ek wens ek het tyd gehad om meer daarvan te lees. Ek kan my indink hoe die verlore seun se pa by die etenstafel sit en van God se wraak lees. Oupa Wyatt het ook altyd ná aandete uit die Bybel gelee en niemand mag van die tafel af opgestaan het voordat hy 'n hele hoofstuk gelee het nie. Ek kon nooit verstaan hoekom dit nodig is om 'n lang lys te lees van wie uit wie gebore is nie, of 'n spul reëls oor priesters wat diere offer en die wêreld vol bloed spat nie, maar ek het my skoonpa nie durf bevraagteken nie. Soos die pa in Harper se verhaal was Oupa Wyatt nie 'n maklike man om te nader nie. Sedert sy dood lê die Bybel nog die hele tyd in die laai van die lessenaar wat in sy kamer staan. Nie een van my kinders het my al gevra waarom nie.

Toe ek by die skuur uit gesukkel kom met 'n emmer vol melk in elke hand, trek 'n skielike beweging naby die agterstoep my aandag. Oor die groot wit afstand sien ek hoe twee donker, gebukkende figure uit die huis te voorskyn kom – een lank, een kort. Ek sien iets roois – Luke se hare – en besef dan dat meneer Harper op Luke leun en deur die sneeu oor die werf na die kleinhuisie sukkel.

Die dwaas! Hy is in geen toestand om buite in 'n storm te wees nie. Sê nou hy gly en val? Ek gaan so vinnig as wat ek kan na hulle toe terwyl die melk heen en weer in die emmers spat.

“Hei!” roep ek. “Wat dink jy doen jy?”

Dan gebeur waarvoor ek bang was. Meneer Harper se knieë gee skielik onder hom in en hy sak op die grond neer; trek vir Luke saam met hom. Ek sit die emmers neer en strompel deur die dik sneeu om te gaan help. Voordat ek hom kan bereik, kruip meneer Harper die laaste paar meter tot by die kleinhuisie. Teen die tyd dat ek hulle bereik, is Luke reeds op en skud die sneeu van sy klere af.

“Is jy oukei, Luke?”

“Hy het ge-v-val.”

“Ek weet. Dit is nie jou skuld nie. Hy is heeltemal te swak om in die eerste plek uit die bed op te staan.”

“Hy het my gevra.”

“En dit was gaaf van jou om te help, Luke, maar jy hoort nie hier buite sonder 'n mus of handskoene nie. Gaan dadelik binnetoe voordat jy dodelik siek word. Ek sal hom help.”

Ek kyk hoe Luke op sy eie voetspore terugstrompel huis toe. 'n Paar minute later kraak die kleinhuisie se deur toe dit oopgaan. Meneer Harper leun teen die kosyn, toegevou in Oupa Wyatt se ou jas. Ek kook van woede.

“Wat dink jy doen jy om sommerso buitetoe te kom? Daar is ’n badkamer op die boonste verdieping in die huis. Probeer jy dan nou jou eie dood veroorsaak, Meneer?”

“Ek moes – ”

“As jy nie kans sien vir die trappe nie, sal jy onder die bed kry wat jy nodig het.”

“Ek het geen reg om dit van jou te vra nie, Mevrou. Ek is ’n vreemdeling vir jou. Ek het nie ’n sent op my naam nie en daar is geen manier waarop ek jou kan vergoed vir wat jy reeds gedoen het nie.” Sy stem is sag, sy gesig baie bleek. Sy tande klap op mekaar ten spyte van die warm woljas wat hy aanhet. Hy lyk so armsalig dat ek vinnig al die harde woorde sluk wat ek nog vir hom wou skree.

“Jy moet terugkom in die huis. Sit jou arm om my nek, dan help ek jou.”

“Dankie. Ek voel ... ’n bietjie ... duiselig.” Hy maak sy oë toe en sak stadig op die grond neer, sy rug teen die deurkosyn vir ondersteuning. “Ek is ... jammer ... ” mompel hy.

“Bly hier. Ek sal die seuns stuur om die slee te bring.”

Dit voel of dit ’n ewigheid vat om hom op die slee te kry en die kort entjie huis toe te sleep; nog langer om hom teen die stoeptrappe op te trek, deur die kombuis te sleep en terug te kry in die bed. Die hele tyd bly die woede in my groei soos gis wat in ’n bol deeg rys. Ek weet nie presies hoekom nie. Ek is nie kwaad vir Gabriel Harper nie – hy het my en my kinders geen skade berokken nie, net homself. Hoekom voel dit dan of ek goed wil gooi of iets wil breek? Ek sou my woede op die hoop hout gaan uitwoed het as meneer Harper nie al klaar so baie vir die huis gekap het nie.

In plaas daarvan maak ek gebraaide aartappels en roereier vir ontbyt. Nadat die kinders klaar geëet het, trek ek hulle warm aan en stuur hulle om buite in die sneeu te speel aangesien die storm uiteindelik bedaar het. Ek wil alleen wees wanneer ek die vreemdeling se been versorg. Terwyl ek wag dat die water warm word sodat ek ’n nuwe kompres gereed kan kry, doen ek iets wat ek glad nie sedert my man se dood gedoen het nie – ek bid. Behalwe dat ’n mens dit nie regtig ’n gebed kan noem nie, of so dink ek, aangesien dit eintlik maar net ek is wat die grootste deel van die tyd in my kop op God skree.

Ek het vir ’n engel gevra, sê ek vir Hom, maar toe stuur Hy vir my ’n sterwende man. Kan Hy nie sien hoe al hierdie sterftes my kinders omkrap nie? Dit is erg genoeg dat God my man van my af weggevat het, alhoewel ek erken dat ek waarskynlik verdien om gestraf te word ná al die leuens wat ek vertel het. Maar wat op aarde het Jimmy en Luke en Becky Jean al ooit gedoen om die verlies van hulle pappa te verdien? Of hulle oupa? Pla dit God

nie dat Jimmy nou 'n volwasse man se deel van die werk moet doen, of dat klein Luke skaars twee woorde ná mekaar sê, of dat Becky skaars genoeg eet om 'n mossie aan die lewe te hou nie? Dalk verdien ek om gestraf te word, maar my drie kinders verdien dit beslis nie. Hierdie plaas is hulle tuiste, en hoe verwag God om hemelsnaam van my om alles aan die gang te hou totdat hulle oud genoeg is om dit self te doen indien Hy nie iemand stuur om my te help nie?

“En gepraat van hulp,” sê ek vir God en mompel die woorde hardop, “U beter vinnig besluit om daardie arme, hawelose man in die slaapkamer te help, want ek gaan beslis nie toelaat dat hy hier by ons sterf nie. Ek sal dit nie toelaat nie! Ek sal nie meer smEEK en pleit vir goed nie, want dit lyk nie of U my hoor wanneer ek mooi vra nie. U beter hom gesond maak! En as hy u idee van 'n engel is, dan beter U iemand anders stuur, en gou ook.”

Ek maak nogal 'n geraas met die potte en ketel terwyl ek die pap opsit. Daar is seker nog steeds 'n kwaai uitdrukking op my gesig toe ek dit alles na die vreemdeling se slaapkamer dra, want hy is wawyd wakker en kyk versigtig na my, asof hy bang is dat ek hom met goed gaan begin gooi.

“Ek is jammer vir die ongerief wat ek veroorsaak, Mevrou,” sê hy.

“Ek is nie kwaad vir jou nie,” antwoord ek en probeer die frons van my voorkop verwyder. “Maar jy beter jou bes doen om gesond te word. Dit beteken jy gaan nie weer buitetoë nie. Ek het vir jou kos gebring en jy gaan dit eet, of jy nou wil of nie, want jy kan nie gesond word as jy nie eet nie. Dan gaan ek jodium op daardie sny van jou sit en dit gaan vrek seer wees, maar jy gaan op jou tande byt en dit vat soos 'n man, want dit is die enigste manier waarop daardie wond ooit gesond gaan word. Verstaan jy my?”

Hy glimlag flou. “Ja, Mevrou.”

“Moet my nie so noem nie. Jy laat my soos 'n ou skooljuffrou voel.” Ek voel hoe 'n glimlag ook aan my mondhoeke pluk. “Nou ja, sien jy kans daarvoor om self hierdie pap te eet of moet ek jou voer?”

“Laat ek self probeer.” Hy vat die lepel by my en sy hand voel warm toe dit teen myne skuur. Sweet pêrel op sy voorkop en hy sukkel om regop te sit in die bed. Toe hy gereed is, sit ek die skinkbord met die bakkie vol pap op sy skoot en fokus dan my aandag op die versorging van sy been. Ek sien vanuit die hoek van my oog hoe die hawermout mors terwyl hy met bewende hande probeer eet, maar ek weet genoeg van mans en hulle hardkoppige trots om hom uit te los.

“Is jy gereed vir die jodium?” vra ek toe hy die laaste happie pap geëet het. Hy knik en strek dan sy arms agtertoe om aan die bed se koperkopstuk vas te hou. Ek kantel die bottel en gooi so gou as wat ek kan 'n dun straaltjie van die

vloeistof oor die lengte van sy wond. Sy lyf trek styf en hy onderdruk 'n harde kreun.

“Jy kan maar skree as jy wil, Meneer.”

“Dis Gabe,” sê hy en byt op sy tande. “My naam is Gabe.”

“Wel, niemand sal jou hoor nie, Gabe. My kinders speel buite in die sneeu en my naaste bure is tannie Batty wat ver onder by die dam bly. Ek gaan nou 'n vars kompres opsit en dan sal ek jou alleen los.”

Ek probeer saggies werk, maar ek kan aan sy vreemde manier van asemhaling agterkom dat sy been baie seer is. Dalk moet ek met hom gesels sodat hy aan iets anders kan dink.

“Wil jy my vertel waar jy so seergekry het?” vra ek.

Hy trek sy asem rukkerig in. “Ek het gehardloop om op 'n stadig bewegende treinwa te spring. Ek het dit al honderd keer tevore gedoen, maar die spoorwegwagte was agter my aan en ek wou nie vir rondlopery in die tronk beland nie. Ek het my been oopgesny teen 'n stuk yster onder aan die wa toe ek opgespring het. Dit was donker en ek het dit nie sien uitsteek nie.”

“Hoe lank terug het dit gebeur?”

“Ek weet nie ... Hoe lank is ek al hier?”

“Jy het een nag in die skuur en een nag in hierdie bed deurgebring.”

Hy blaas sy asem uit. “Dit moes seker twee of drie dae voor dit gewees het ... Ek is nie seker nie. Ek verloor redelik tred met die tyd wanneer ek so sonder 'n kalender of horlosie op die pad is.”

Hy het 'n rustige, diep stem wat soos die lae note van 'n kerkorrel klink. Tog voel dit of sy woorde net so sag soos sneeuvlokkies in die vertrek neerdaal. Ek kyk na hom en wens ek kon hom vra hoekom iemand wat so welsprekend is en woorde lewend laat word wanneer hy dit op papier neerskryf dan moet rondswerf soos 'n nuttelose boemelaar. Hy hou steeds die kopstuk vas, sy oë toe. Ek verbind vinnig sy been.

“Daar's hy. Ek is klaar.”

Toe hy sy oë oopmaak, gee ek vir hom 'n handdoek sodat hy die sweet kan afvee wat oor sy gesig loop. Hy is spierwit.

“Het jy enigiets anders nodig?” vra ek terwyl ek my goed bymekaarmaak.

“Ja ... Ek moet vir jou dankie sê, mevrou Wyatt.”

“Wel, jy kan my bedank deur beter te word.”

Ek is byna by die deur uit toe die gedagte by my opkom. Ek kan om die dood nie onthou dat ek vir hom gesê het wat my van is nie. Ek draai stadig om en kyk na hom. “Hoe weet jy wat my van is?”

Hy kyk vlugtig weg en vir die breukdeel van 'n sekonde lyk hy presies soos Jimmy lyk wanneer ek hom op heter daad met iets betrap. Dan is die

oomblik verby en hy glimlag flou. “Ek het die woorde buite gelees en net aangeneem ...”

“O, natuurlik.”

Ek weet waarvan hy praat. My skoonpa het lank gelede in beter en gelukkiger dae teen die kant van die skuur gevef: *Wyatt-boorde – Frank Wyatt & Seuns, Eienaars*. Ek sidder toe ek daaraan dink dat Frank Wyatt en al sy seuns weg is.

“Dit is mevrou Wyatt, nè?” vra hy skaam.

“Ja, maar jy kan my Eliza noem.”

Ek het pas die jodium en ander goed gebêre toe my drie kinders skielik dawerend nog met hulle stewels aan by die agterdeur instorm en die hele wêreld vol sneeu trap.

“Mamma! Mamma! Kom gou!” Hulle almal trek aan my romp en praat tegelyk.

“Hou op! Julle maak my vloer sopnat. Kyk net na hierdie gemors.” Ek probeer hulle uitstoot tot op die agterstoep, maar hulle luister nie na my nie. Uit die manier waarop hulle tekere gaan, begin ek dink dat iets verskrikliks gebeur het. “Stadig nou, een op ’n slag. Laat Jimmy my vertel wat gebeur het.”

Hy is uitasem van die hardloop. “Ons het teen die heuwel agter tannie Batty se huis afgegely toe sy uitkom en ons vra om haar te help om die sneeu weg te skep. Sy het gesê sy sal ons betaal en als. Toe volg ons haar tot by haar huis en sy hou aan om my Matthew te noem, selfs al het ek vir haar gesê my naam is Jimmy – ”

“Is sy ’n heks?” vra Becky skielik.

“Nee, natuurlik nie,” sê ek. “Wie het dit vir jou gesê?”

Sy kyk na Jimmy.

“Dit was ’n grap,” sê hy en stamp aan Becky. “In elk geval, ek het gedink sy wil hê ons moet ’n paadjie na haar kleinhuisie toe oopmaak of so iets, maar sy sê toe nee, ons moet die sneeu uitvat wat binne-in haar huis is.”

Ek onthou hoe my skoonpa altyd daarop aangedring het dat tannie Batty mal is en hoe hy ons gewaarsku het om weg te bly van haar af. Ek soek nou vinnig na ’n manier om haar aan my kinders te verduidelik.

“Luister, julle moet verstaan dat tannie Batty – ”

“Maar, Mamma, sy was reg. Daar is sneeu binne-in haar huis!”

“Binne-in? Hoe op aarde het dit daar gekom?”

“Ek weet nie, maar Mamma moet kom. Daar is heeltemal te veel vir my en Luke en Becky om alleen uit te skep.”

Terwyl ek my jas en ’n ou paar stewels van Sam aantrek, besluit ek dat

tannie Batty se deur dalk in die storm oopgewaai het en die sneeu toe só in haar huis gekom het. Die oomblik toe ek egter bo-op die heuwel agter haar huis staan, sien ek dit is glad nie die geval nie. Die dak bo haar kombuis het heeltemal ingeval as gevolg van die sneeu se gewig. Dit lyk of die kombuis 'n paar jaar ná die oorspronklike kliphuis aangebou is, en die dak is nie so steil óf so goed gebou nie.

Ons stap om na die voordeur toe en tannie Batty maak vir ons oop. Ek was nog nooit in haar huis in al die jare wat ek in die groot plaashuis 'n ent verder bly nie, en ek staan in haar voorportaal en staar. Dit is netjies en knus met die valletjiesgordyne en gehekelde dekens wat jy in 'n oujongnoot se huis sal verwag. Maar elke stukkie muurspasie in die hele huis is vol rakke – en elke stukkie van elke rak is vol boeke. Dit lyk vir my of tannie Batty meer boeke het as die dorpsbiblioteek. Ek sien selfs 'n lang ry dun, geel rugkante op 'n onderste rak wat *National Geographic*-tydskrifte moet wees. 'n Skommelstoel staan langs die koolstoof asook 'n groot radio met 'n plant bo-op.

Wat lyk of dit eens op 'n tyd die eetkamer was, bevat nou 'n enorme houtlessenaar, die soort wat jy in 'n bank of in 'n prokureur se kantoor sal sien. Agter die lessenaar staan daar selfs 'n draaistoel met swart leer oorgetrek. Die tikmasjien wat bo-op die lessenaar staan, is baie groter en luukser as die een in meneer Harper se goingsak.

Dit is ysig koud binne-in die huis en dit lyk of klein tannie Batty elke trui en jas aanhet wat sy besit. “Het jy die vuurhoutjies gebring, Toots?” vra sy.

Ek frons. “Vuurhoutjies ... ?”

“Ja, ek het vir klein Matthew gevra om vir my saam te bring. Ek bêre myne in die kombuis en sal eers daarby kan uitkom wanneer ons al die sneeu verwyder het. Jy sien, my vuur het uitgebrand en Winky en die meisies hou nie daarvan as die huis so koud word nie.”

Ek neem aan Winky is die onplesierige klein hondjie wat vir ons blaf en knor vandat ons by die huis ingestap het sodat arme Becky haar byna doodgeskrik het en steeds soos 'n apie aan my been vasklou. Maar ek sien “die meisies” nêrens nie. Van waar ek staan, kan ek egter tot in die vernietigde kombuis sien en ek besef dadelik daar is geen manier dat tannie Batty daardie deel van die huis kan toemaak sodat sy die woonvertrek en slaapkamer kan warm hou nie. Sy sal ook beslis nie kan kos maak in daardie kombuis nie. Die duidelike waarheid is dat haar huis onbewoonbaar is.

Ek weet wat ek moet doen, en dit laat my voel of die dak pas reg bo my kop ingegee het. Ek trek my asem diep in en vat sag aan haar arm. Dan praat ek so stadig as wat ek kan. “Tannie Batty, dit gaan nie help om al daardie sneeu uit te skep nie. Vuurhoutjies gaan ook nie help nie. Jy sal steeds nie



warm kan bly of kos kan maak nie. Jou kombuis se dak het ingeval. Verstaan jy dit? Jy kan nie in hierdie huis bly totdat die dak reggemaak is nie.”

“Die dak? Genugtig! Ek dink nie ek het ’n leer wat lank genoeg is om by die dak uit te kom nie. Ek sal een moet leen en – ”

“Nee, luister. Tannie sal iemand moet h  r om die dak te herstel. Dit is ’n groot werk, Tannie. Ek kan dit nie doen nie, en Tannie ook nie. Intussen, tot dit reggemaak is ... ” Ek bly stil en wens dat ek nie tannie Batty se naaste familie was nie; wens dat ek nie reeds ’n invalide gehad het om te versorg nie; wens dat ek God nooit gevra het om vir my nog ’n engel te stuur nie. “Intussen kan Tannie saam met my en die kinders in die plaashuis kom bly.”

“My suster Lydia se huis?”

“Ja.” Ek het nie die energie om aan haar te verduidelik dat Lydia, my skoonma, dood is net soos die res van hulle nie. Tannie Batty sal dit in elk geval net weer vergeet. Voeg dit alles by my kommer oor meneer Harper wat kan doodgaan en dit voel of ek meer probleme het as Job se vrou.

“O aarde,” kreun sy. “Ek kan nie vir Winky en die meisies alleen hier los nie.”

Ek byt op my tande. “Winky kan ook kom.”

“Maar Frank Wyatt haat honde. Hy sal nie een in sy huis toelaat nie.”

“Frank Wyatt is dood. Dit is nou my huis.” Tannie Batty staar my aan asof sy die skokkende nuus nou vir die eerste keer hoor; asof sy nie drie maande gelede by sy begrafnis was nie. Wat probeer die goeie Here aan my doen?

“Kan ek Tannie help om ’n paar goedjies in te pak?” vra ek sagkens.

Sy glimlag. “Ja, dankie. Baie dankie, Toots.”

Ons gaan na haar klein slaapkamertjie toe en ek help haar om ’n paar stukkies klere en onderklere en toiletbenodigdhede in ’n verweerde ou reissak te pak. Tannie Batty pak ook haar breiwerk en ’n ou foto in ’n geelkoperraam in. Dan kyk sy in die vertrek rond.

“Daar’s hy. Ek skat dit is al wat ek nodig het. Is jy seker dat Winky en die meisies ook welkom is?”

Ek knik stil.

“Ek sal die meisies moet wakker maak. Hulle sal nie daarvan hou dat hulle slapie versteur word nie, maar dit kan nie anders nie.”

Ek sien nog steeds geen teken van enige “meisies” nie. Ek wonder of tannie Batty net soos my Becky Jean dalk verbeeldingsvriende het. Dan trek sy egter die kwilt op haar bed weg en ek sien wat ek gedink het maar net hobbels op ’n ou verebed is, is inderwaarheid twee enorme katte wat soos molle onder die kwilt ingekruip het.

Becky gil van plesier. “O, kyk. Katjies.” Sy kruip op tannie Batty se bed en

trek haar handskoene uit sodat sy hulle kan vryf. “Het hulle name?”

“Ja, daardie een is Queen Esther en dit is Arabella.”

Albei het strepe – Esther is skakerings van grys en Arabella ’n gemmerkat – met spatsels wit op hulle borskaste en gesigte. Hulle strek en gaap en knip hulle geel oë slaperig vir tannie Batty.

“Komaan, meisies. Opstaantyd,” sê sy. “Ek is bevrees ons moet vir ’n paar dae na ’n warmer plek verhuis.”

Ek wil glo dat dit net vir ’n paar dae sal wees, maar ek weet in my hart die kans is goed dat hulle baie langer sal bly. Selfs al kry ons ’n skrynwerker wat in hierdie sneeu al die pad hierheen sal kom, twyfel ek of hy enigins iets aan die huis sal kan doen voordat dit warmer word. Dit lyk vir my of tannie Batty se hele kombuis oorgebou sal moet word.

“Nou toe dan,” sê sy. “Sal julle kinders my help? Samuel kan hierdie sak dra en Matthew kan – ”

“Ek is Jimmy,” sê hy. “En dit is Luke.”

“O ja, dis reg. Jong Matthew is weg Frankryk toe om in daardie aaklige oorlog te gaan veg, nè?” Sy gee vir Luke die reissak en buk dan af om ’n leiband aan Winky se halsband vas te maak. Sy hou die ander punt na Jimmy toe uit.

“Byt die hond?” vra hy versigtig. Winky knor nog die hele tyd vandat ons ingekom het.

“Om hemelsnaam, nee.” Sy buk oor die klein hondjie en sê streng: “Dis nou genoeg daarvan, asseblief.” Winky tjank en gaan lê met ’n sug op die matjie.

“Ek sal vir Queen Esther dra,” praat tannie Batty verder, “want sy kan ’n bietjie buierig wees ná haar slapie. Julle ma kan vir Arabella dra.”

“Wat van my?” vra Becky.

“O, jy het ’n baie belangrike werk om te doen, Toots. Jy moet my vriend Ivy dra.”

Ek is bang om te vra wie Ivy is, maar sy draai na die welige klimopplant wat bo-op die radio staan. Tannie Batty sit die pot versigtig in Becky se arms en drapeer die ranke om haar skouers sodat dit nie op die grond moet sleep nie. “Ek hoop julle het ’n radio. Ivy is mal daaroor om na die radio te luister.”

“Nee, tannie,” sê Jimmy somber. “Oupa Wyatt wou nie een in die huis hê nie.”

“Wel, dan sal ons maar vir haar moet sing. Kan julle kinders sing?”

“Seker maar,” sê Jimmy en trek sy skouers op, alhoewel ek nie kan onthou dat ek al ooit een van my kinders hoor sing het nie.

“Uitstekend,” antwoord tannie Batty. Sy gaan terug na haar slaapkamer toe

en rol elke kat op sy rug voordat sy hulle soos babas in kombesies toedraai. Sy gee die gemmerkat vir my aan voordat sy self die grys een optel. Nie een van die katte protesteer teen hierdie onwaardige behandeling nie, maar aan die ander kant is hulle so verskriklik vet dat dit vir hulle moeilik sou wees om terug te baklei. Tannie Batty kyk een laaste keer hartseer na haar huisie voordat ons buitetoegaan.

Ek kan my nie eens indink wat 'n prentjie ons moes teken waar ons in 'n lang ry deur die sneeu al teen die heuwel op na die plaashuis toe stap, almal tot by ons oë toegewikkel in musse en serpe met 'n verweerde reissak, twee vet katte, 'n kort en dik gedrog van 'n hondjie en 'n oorgroeiende klimopplant tussen ons nie. Terwyl ons voortsukkel, wonder ek hoe om die verwaarloosde man in die spaarkamer aan tannie Batty te verduidelik. Op die ou einde besluit ek maar om dit te los sodat sy kan dink hy is wie sy ook al wil hê hy moet wees. Ek sal my hande vol hê net om haar te herinner dat Luke en Jimmy nie my oorlede man en sy ouer broer is nie. Sy sal my seker binnekort Lydia begin noem.

Ons is skaars in die huis toe Becky na die spaarkamer se toe deur wys en sê: “Ons moet baie stil wees, want 'n engel slaap daarbinne. Hy is siek.”

Tannie Batty hou haar vinger voor haar lippe en knik, asof dit die natuurlikste ding in die wêreld is vir mense om 'n siek engel te hê wat in hulle huis lê en slaap. Ons haal die komberse van die twee katte af en hulle stap weg asof hulle presies weet waarheen hulle gaan. Becky en tannie Batty kry vir Ivy 'n nuwe tuiste in die voorkamer. En die oomblik toe ons Winky se leiband losmaak, stap hy na die matjie voor die koolstoof, draai drie keer in die rondte en val reg in die middel daarvan neer, asof hy tussen die oë geskiet is. 'n Minuut later snork hy te lekker. Ek wens ek kon langs hom gaan lê, maar dit is reeds tyd vir middagete en ek het nog nie eens die ontbyt se skottelgoed gewas nie.

“Becky Jean, vat vir tannie Batty boontoe en wys haar jou kamer,” sê ek. “Sy sal vir 'n paar aande daar by jou moet slaap, aangesien daar reeds iemand in die spaarkamer is. Dis nou as dit oukei is met tannie Batty.”

“Dit is heeltemal reg met my, Toots,” sê sy. “Ek kan op bykans enige plek slaap.”

“Tannie is nie régtig 'n heks nie, nè?” vra Becky asof sy haarself wil gerusstel.

“Glad nie! Die Bybel sê God haat hekse ... en aangesien God 'n goeie vriend van my is, kan ek tog sekerlik nie 'n heks wees nie.”

“Jimmy het dit net gesê om my bang te maak, nè?”

“Ek dink so,” antwoord tannie Batty toe die twee van hulle opgaan

boontoe. “Ek het self nooit ’n broer gehad nie, maar ek weet wel klein seuntjies hou daarvan om klein dogtertjies te terg.”

Ek slaan ’n bord kos aanmekaar en noem dit middagete. Toe ek later na meneer Harper se kamer toe gaan om vir hom ook kos te vat, sien ek dat hy kreun en vuurwarm is van die koors. Ek stuur Jimmy buitetoë om ’n skottel vol sneeu te maak en week waslappe daarin sodat ek dit op meneer Harper se gesig en nek kan sit in ’n poging om die koors te breek. Ek is die grootste deel van die middag daarmee besig. Ek ruil ook weer die kompres op sy wond om die gif uit te trek, en tussendeur stook ek die stowe en was die skottelgoed en kook boontjies sodat ek sop kan maak vir aandete.

Ek hoor hoe die kinders hulle warm aantrek terwyl ek vir meneer Harper versorg en dan verdwyn hulle vir ’n rukkie saam met tannie Batty na buite. Hulle almal kom ’n uur of so later teen die heuwel van haar huis af op terwyl hulle iets op Luke se slee trek. Ek steur my nie juis daaraan nie, aangesien ek te bekommerd is oor meneer Harper.

Toe ek later wortels en uie sny om by die boontjies in te gooi, hoor ek hoe die kinders vir tannie Batty in die voorkamer vermaak, of dalk vermaak sy hulle. Dit is moeilik om agter te kom. Die misterieuse bondel was toe al die tyd ’n klomp boeke en die kinders blaai saam met haar daardeur, vasgenael terwyl hulle na die kleurvolle prente staar.

Intussen word Winky wakker en besluit om my skaduwee te word. Elke keer wanneer ek beweeg, trap ek byna op hom. Hy is maklik die lelikste hond wat ek nog ooit gesien het met kort bene en skewe pote en ’n stert wat soos ’n stomp duim lyk. Sy kort, wit pels vorm op party plekke dik rolletjies en op ander plekke is dit gekreukel, soos ’n goedkoop pak klere. Hy het ’n boelhond se lyf, maar sy kop is heeltemal verkeerd. In plaas van ’n plat gesig het hy die lang neus van ’n gewone hond en dit lyk of sy tong nie in sy bek pas nie, want dit hang die meeste van die tyd uit, nat en vol kwyl. Indien hy dit wel regkry om sy bek toe te maak, steek die tong steeds aan die voorkant uit en laat hom soos ’n ongemanierde kind lyk.

Winky se een oog is blind en hy knip sy gesonde oog die hele tyd, asof dit sy eie kop volg. Elke keer wanneer ek ’n tree gee, stap dié eenooghond saam met my met sy simpel glimlag en knippende oog, asof ons ’n privaat grappie deel.

Ek kom skielik agter dat my kombuisvadoeke verdwyn. Daar hang altyd een aan ’n hakie naby die wasbak, maar toe ek dit wil vat om my hande af te droog is dit weg. Ek haal ’n skoon vadoek uit en hang dit op, maar toe ek klaar die tafel vir aandete gedek het, is dit ook weg. Ek kry albei agter die stoof na waar die gemmerkat, Arabella, dit gesleep het. Ek staan vir ’n rukkie

en kyk terwyl sy die materiaal trap en skuif totdat dit presies reg is, en dit is duidelik dat sy besig is om agter die stoof nes te skrop. Ek kreun.

“Is daar enigsins ’n kans dat Arabella binnekort vir ons ’n klomp klein katjies gaan gee?” vra ek met aandete vir tannie Batty.

“Nie ’n kans nie, Toots. Sy dink maar net sy gaan. Ek dink dit is heel onmoontlik.” Tannie Batty bloos bloedrooi sodat ek besluit om nie verder daaroor te praat nie. Ek hoop maar net sy is reg. Dinge is skielik mal genoeg hier rond. ’n Werpsel katjies is die laaste ding wat ons nodig het.

Ná aandete, toe ek en die seuns begin warm aantrek om uit te gaan skuur toe, is hulle handskoene ook weg. My frustrasie groei terwyl ons tevergeefs daarna soek. Ek het nie die tyd óf die geduld vir hierdie nonsens nie.

“Julle seuns weet mos julle is veronderstel om julle nat handskoene hier by die stoof op te hang sodat dit kan droog word,” raas ek.

“Ek hét dit daar gehang,” hou Jimmy vol. “Ek het regtig.”

“Nou hoekom is dit dan nie hier nie? Handskoene groei nie net vlerke en vlieg weg nie.”

“Hier is dit,” roep Luke skielik uit. Hy wys na Arabella se nes agter die stoof en ek kan my oë nie glo nie. Die kat lê op haar sy met die handskoene soos babatjies teen haar lyf. Ek verloor my humeur.

“Jou simpel kat!” skree ek. “Dit is handskoene, nie klein katjies nie.”

Tannie Batty tik my liggies op die skouer. “Jy sal haar nie oortuig nie, Toots. Arabella is ’n bietjie doof.”

“Wel, sy is nie blind nie. Kan sy nie sien dit is handskoene nie?”

Tannie Batty glimlag flou. “Ons almal sien wat ons wil sien. Arme Arabella wil so graag ’n mamma wees.”

Toe ek later van buite af inkom, sien ek die ander kat, wat halfpad so groot soos ’n leeu is, lê uitgestrek op my skommelstoel, doodtevrede asof dit aan haar behoort. Toe ek haar probeer wegskuif sodat ek vir ’n paar minute kan sit en rus, blaas sy vir my.

“Daardie Esther kan partykeer baie gemeen wees,” verduidelik tannie Batty toe sy die kat van my stoel af jaag. Dan sê sy saggies vir my: “Dit is omdat sy weet Arabella is mooier as sy.”

Ek kan eerlikwaar nie juis die skoonheid in enige van die twee sien nie, aangesien hulle so vet is. En soos ek gesê het, is Winky ook geen skoonheid nie. Hy sit die hele aand by tannie Batty se voete en kwyl terwyl hy kyk hoe sy brei.

“Waar het Tannie hom gekry?” vra ek uiteindelik.

“O, Winky het vir my gekry. Hy het een oggend by my deur opgedaag soos ’n engel wat uit die hemel gestuur is. Ek het daardie tyd ’n klomp hoenders

gehad en het 'n goeie waghond gesoek om die jakkalse en wasbere weg te jaag. Ons was van dag een af goeie vriende.”

“Watter soort hond is hy?” vra Jimmy.

“Winky is 'n jaghond.”

Ek lag byna kliphard. Al die jaghonde wat ek al ooit gesien het, is maer, grasiëuse diere met lang bene, en nie vet goedjies wat met krom pote rond waggel terwyl hulle tonge uithang nie. Ek sien in my gedagtes hoe 'n bok omval van histerie by die aangesig van dié gedrog.

“Dis hoe hy sy oog verloor het,” verduidelik tannie Batty. “In 'n jagongeluk.”

“Kon Tannie dit nie weer kry nie?” vra Becky.

“O nee, dit het nie soos 'n albaster uitgeval nie, Toots. Hy het net die gebruik daarvan verloor. Hy is blind in daardie oog.” Sy praat skielik sagter. “Hy hou nie daarvan om daaroor te praat nie.” Winky laat sak sy snoet op tannie Batty se voet asof hy verstaan dat sy van hom praat. Sy buk af en vryf sy kop. “Hy is 'n goeie hond, my Winky.”

“Wat was sy naam vóór die ongeluk?” vra ek.

“O, hy was nog altyd Winky.” Tannie Batty kry 'n veraf kyk in haar oë. “Nogal profeties, nè?”

Ek knik en wonder hoe lank dit gaan vat voordat ek net so mal is soos sy en haar troeteldiere.

Ek sit die kinders in die bed en kry tannie Batty rustig in Becky se kamer voordat ek die vure demp vir die nag en dan een laaste maal terugkeer na meneer Harper se kamer. Ek moet erken dat ek bang is om daar in te gaan. Dit het die hele dag so sleg met hom gegaan dat ek seker is hy is op die randjie van die dood. Dit is moeilik om iemand te versorg wat ernstig siek is, want jou natuurlike instink is om hom gesond te maak en wanneer hy sieker word en sterf, voel jy dat dit jou skuld is. Dalk moes jy iets anders gedoen het; dalk kon jy meer gedoen het.

Ek trek my asem diep in en sê vir myself om nie te geheg te raak aan hom nie. Dan gaan ek by sy kamer in. Hy is vuurwarm van die koors en so ylend dat hy nie weet waar hy is nie. Ek weet hy het 'n krisispunt bereik – vanaand sal hy óf leef óf sterf. Ek vee hom met koue lappe af totdat hy bewe. Dan draai ek 'n laken styf om sy lyf sodat hy moet ophou rondrol. Die meeste van sy woorde maak glad nie sin nie, maar toe hy begin huil: “Vader ... Vader, ek is jammer ... ” stuur dit rillings langs my ruggraat af. Ek weet nie of hy na sy pa of sy hemelse Vader roep nie. Dit laat my aan my eie pa dink en ek wonder of hy ooit aan my dink.

Dan begin meneer Harper huil en dit is so 'n hartverskeurende geluid dat

ek op die bed se rand gaan sit en hom in my arms vashou totdat hy ophou. “Vergewe my, Vader,” sê hy oor en oor terwyl hy aan my vasklou. “Asseblief, asseblief, vergewe my ...”

Dit gaan die grootste deel van die nag so. Ek maak weer sy wond skoon, gebruik ’n hele bottel jodium en probeer hom koel hou. Hy het ’n dokter nodig, dis verseker, maar ek kan nêrens heen ry in hierdie sneeu nie. Ek voel hulpeloos. Dit voel van voor af soos toe Sam dood is, behalwe dat daar geen sneeu was toe Sam siek geword het nie en dit net Frank Wyatt se hardkoppigheid was wat my gekeer het om dorp toe te ry en die dokter te gaan haal. Ek het uiteindelik al die pad tot in Deer Springs geloop om vir Sam te gaan hulp soek, maar dit was te laat.

Ek kan ook niks meer vir meneer Harper doen nie, maar ek wil hê hy moet weet iemand gee om; dat hy nie heeltemal alleen is nie. Dit moet vreeslik wees om so alleen en onbemind te sterf soos met my skoonpa gebeur het. Ek trek ’n stoel nader, hou meneer Harper se vuurwarm hand vas, streel oor sy voorkop en drup water met ’n lepel op sy tong. Ek gesels met hom oor my eie lewe en ek huil van voor af oor Sam, want meneer Harper se versorging bring al die herinneringe terug – hoe verskriklik Sam gely het, hoe hy nooit moes gesterf het nie.

Toe gebeur ’n wonderwerk. Lank ná middernag breek meneer Harper se koors uiteindelik. Hy hou op kreun en lê stil, en dan raak hy rustig aan die slaap. Ek het ook slaap nodig, maar toe ek vroeg daardie oggend in my eie bed klim, kan ek nie my trane keer nie.

Ek het tien jaar gelede in Deer Springs van die trein af geklim, want ek wou beheer neem oor my lewe; ’n tuiste en die familie vind waarna ek so gesmag het. Nou het my lewe egter soos ’n trop wegholperde van koers af gegaan en ek hou nie langer die teuels in my hande nie. Ek oorweeg dit om te bid, maar sê dan hardop: “Nee. Ek vra nie vir nog engele nie. Hulle is te veel werk.”

Ek wag nou al maande lank dat God iemand sal stuur om my te help, maar ek skat Hy is ’n bietjie doof. Ek is heeltemal alleen, afgesonder van die dorp, vasgevang met sneeu wat tot by die vensterbanke strek – en tog wil ek nie hê die sneeu moet smelt nie, want ek het geen idee oor hoe ek Wyatt-boorde op my eie gaan bestuur wanneer die lente kom nie. Ek het ’n huis vol mense vir wie ek moet sorg – drie kinders wat nog rou, ’n sterwende boemelaar en ’n mal ou vrou met haar ewe mal troeteldiere; tog voel dit steeds vir my of ek heeltemal alleen is.

Waar ek in die donker lê en myself net al hoe jammerder kry terwyl ek wens ek het iemand gehad om my geselskap te hou, hoor ek die geluid van ’n

hond se toonnaels op die houtvloer. Die geluid beweeg in die gang op, by my slaapkamer in, oor my vloer. Ek loer oor die bed se rand. Winky staan in die maanlig, kwykend terwyl hy met sy skewe glimlag vir my kyk. Dit is die laaste strooi.

“Jy hoort nie hier bo nie,” sê ek met ’n kwaai fluistering. Ek waai met arms na hom. “Weg is jy. Gaan terug ondertoe.”

Ek het nie gedink daardie vet ou ding kan spring nie, maar dis presies wat hy doen – hy spring tot bo-op my bed.

“Nee! Stout hond. Klim af.”

Winky kom lê langs my waar Sam altyd geslaap het en sit sy kop op my knie neer. Daar is iets omtrent die gewig van sy vet klein lyfie, sy hitte, wat vreemd vertroostend is. Ek wil nie regtig hê hy moet gaan nie.

“Nou goed dan,” sê ek kwaai. “Maar net vir vanaand.”

Hy lig sy kop, kyk na my en knipoog.



## CHAPTER THREE

I woke up the next morning to the aroma of coffee. Sunlight streamed through my bedroom window like it was noon. I leaped out of bed when I realized why—I'd overslept!

How could I have done such a stupid thing? I got dressed as fast as I could. I had kids to tend to, chores to do. I raced past the other bedrooms and saw that my kids were already up and gone. Who knew what mischief they were into by now?

I hurried downstairs, then stopped short in the kitchen doorway. Aunt Batty stood at the stove singing "Amazing Grace" and flipping pancakes. She wore a homemade yellow sweater that was nearly as bright as the sunshine outside. All three kids sat at the table wolfing down pancakes smothered in apple butter as fast as she could flip them. Even Becky was eating, her mouth crammed so full that her cheeks puffed out. The milk pails were full of milk, the egg basket was full of eggs, the coal scuttle was full of coal, and both stoves were fired up and heating the house. I ran my hand through my sleep-tousled hair and sank onto a chair, feeling numb.

"You should have called me. I didn't realize it was so late...I must have forgotten to set my alarm."

Aunt Batty grinned. "You didn't forget, Toots. I sneaked in and turned it off. Winky told me you needed your rest."

"But the chores—"

"All done." Aunt Batty set a plate of pancakes in front of me. "I'll get you some coffee to go with those."

"We all helped with the chores, Mama, so you could sleep," Jimmy

said. The kids were real proud of the gift they had given me. I felt dizzy with the surprise of it all.

“Thank you. But listen, Aunt Batty, you don’t have to do chores—”

“Nonsense! Of course I do. As I explained to Winky and the girls this morning, it shows very poor manners to accept someone’s hospitality and not do your fair share of the work.”

As if to prove Aunt Batty’s words, Queen Esther waddled out of my pantry with a dead mouse dangling from her teeth, its tail trailing across my floor. I’d known for some time that I had a mouse or two living in my pantry, nibbling on anything they pleased, but even though I’d set several traps, I hadn’t caught a single one.

Esther crossed the kitchen and dropped her prize at my feet, smirking up at me as if to say, “There. That’s how it’s done.” Then she turned her back, tail in the air, and strode into the parlor to take her morning nap on my chair.

“Thank you,” I mumbled.

Seated beside me, Becky took one look at the dead mouse and scrambled to stand on her chair, screaming, “Eeee! A mouse! A mouse!” The boys laughed out loud at her—even Luke laughed—as she danced from foot to foot, wringing her hands.

Aunt Batty scooped up the mouse with a broom and dustpan, shaking her head in dismay. “That Queen Esther is a good little hunter, but she never cleans up after herself.” She carried the dustpan outside and set it on the porch, mouse and all. “Esther will be looking for that, come dinnertime,” she said as she closed the door again.

“She eats *mice*?” Becky asked with a shiver.

“Certainly, Toots. All cats do. But Esther eats more than her fair share of them, don’t you think? That’s why she’s so chubby.” She helped Becky climb down again and fed her a forkful of pancakes. “I’ll bet you can’t finish your breakfast before your mother finishes hers.”

“Yes, I can!”

I watched in astonishment as Becky ate every scrap of food on her plate in record time. It occurred to me that I must still be dreaming.

I tasted the pancakes and understood right away why the kids wolfed them down. And the coffee was the best I'd tasted since the stock market crashed. It must have come from Aunt Batty's house, since my coffee was mixed with chicory and tasted nowhere near this good.

All the while I ate I kept glancing at the spare room door, wondering what I'd find on the other side. Mr. Harper had seemed fine when I went to bed, but fevers could be tricky. He might be all better or he might be dead. I ate slowly, steeling myself for the worst.

When I finally got up the nerve to peek inside his room I was relieved to hear him snoring. I tiptoed to his bedside and laid my hand on his forehead. It still felt cool. Mr. Harper stirred at my touch, then opened his eyes and looked at me. I felt embarrassed, remembering how freely I'd talked to him last night, holding him in my arms and everything. I hoped he didn't remember.

"Hi," I said shyly. "How you feeling?"

"Better than I have in a long time." When he smiled he was an altogether different man from the sick one I'd been tending. His gaze unnerved me.

"Think you could eat something?" I asked when I found my voice.

"That coffee smells awfully good."

"I'll get you some."

"Mrs. Wyatt, wait—" I paused near the door. "Listen," he said, "I was wondering...I know I was out of my head last night. Was I saying things?"

"Don't worry. Nothing made any sense." I breathed a sigh of relief knowing he probably wouldn't remember the things I'd said, either. But when I saw that he still had a worried look on his face, I tried to reassure him. "The only words I understood were when you called for

your father. You scared me half to death because I figured you were about to die and you were calling on the heavenly Father, asking Him to forgive you.” I waited for him to smile again, but he closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“I’ll take that coffee now, ma’am...If it’s not too much trouble.”

I shut his door and returned to the kitchen. Aunt Batty was singing for all she was worth as she washed the breakfast dishes. “How’s that angel doing this morning?” she said when she’d finished the chorus.

“He’s not an angel.” I started to explain, then gave up. “He’s much better. He’d like some coffee if there’s any left.”

“Is he hungry?” she asked. “I can fix him some pancakes, too.”

For reasons I couldn’t explain, I suddenly felt shy about tending to Mr. Harper now that he was awake and aware of things. I handed the cup and saucer to Aunt Batty. “Why don’t you bring this to him and ask him yourself?”

“All right.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “The children told me all about him yesterday. We’ve been praying for him.”

A jolt of alarm rocked me. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“Why not? The Good Book says—”

I grabbed Aunt Batty’s arm and hustled her into the pantry so the kids couldn’t hear us talking. “Listen,” I said in an angry whisper, “our experience with prayer hasn’t been very good. We prayed and prayed for their daddy to get better, and he died!”

“Oh, we didn’t pray that the angel would get better—only that God’s will would be done, and that we could accept it.”

“What’s the difference?” I said bitterly.

“Oh, there’s a big diff—”

I pushed past her into kitchen, not wanting to hear her reasoning. “Becky Jean, come dry these dishes. Boys, get ready for school.”

“It’s Saturday, Mama,” Jimmy said. He and Luke exchanged glances. I was losing my mind.

Aunt Batty followed me out of the pantry and opened the door to Mr. Harper's room, coffee cup in hand. She stopped short.

"Goodness, you scared me!" she said. "You look just like a big old woolly bear lying in that bed! Now, why would you want to let your hair and beard get all shaggy like that?"

I hurried into the room behind her, afraid she had offended him. "Mr. Harper has been sick with a fever, Aunt Batty. He can't do much for himself."

"Well, I could clean him up real nice, if you want me to. I took good care of Walter years ago, when he was bedridden. And then poor Papa, of course. Shaved them both clean as a whistle."

Even if I were dying I wouldn't let crazy old Aunt Batty near me with a straight razor, but I didn't know how to warn Mr. Harper. He looked from me to Aunt Batty in confusion, as if things were moving too fast for him to keep up.

"Let's wait until he's feeling better," I said quickly.

"Suit yourself," she said, with a shrug. She handed him the coffee. "Here you go. I'm Aunt Batty, by the way. Who might you be?"

"My name's Gabe...Gabriel Harper."

Aunt Batty looked thoughtful. "Gabriel, eh? I once knew another angel by the name of Gabriel. You any relation? You do look kind of familiar...."

He gave a nervous laugh. "I'm really sorry to disappoint everyone but I'm not an angel. Far from it, I'm afraid." He took a sip of coffee. "Mmm! This tastes as good as it smells. Thank you, ma'am."

"Would you like some pancakes to go with that?" Aunt Batty asked. "My pancakes are delicious, I must say. I have a secret ingredient— so secret that even I don't know what it is."

He smiled slightly as she howled at her own joke. "Sure...Thank you very much, ma'am."

His attention seemed drawn to something in the doorway behind

me so I turned to look. All three kids were trying to sneak into the room. “Everyone out!” I said. “This isn’t a sideshow. Mr. Harper deserves a little privacy.” I didn’t want them getting friendly and feeling Mr. Harper’s loss when he either died or left us again. I tried to herd them out but he overruled me.

“No, it’s all right,” he said in his deep, soft voice. “I wouldn’t mind some company.”

I gave up and fled to the kitchen to get his breakfast. The kids had left three pancakes sitting all by themselves on the platter. I put them on a clean plate, dabbed a mound of apple butter on top, and brought them in to Mr. Harper. I was only gone a minute or two, but in that time Winky managed to waddle in to join the crowd and the gray cat decided to sprawl herself across the foot of his bed. Before I had a chance to shoo them out, the orange cat jumped onto the bed, too, carrying Becky’s mitten in her mouth as if hauling a kitten around by the scruff of the neck.

“Oh, look,” Becky said. “Arabella brought you her kitten.”

Gabe stared at the cat, squinting his eyes as if he wasn’t sure if he was seeing things or not. Arabella dropped the mitten in his lap then lay down beside him, purring and kneading his leg with her paws.

“That’s the sorriest-looking kitten I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“It’s really my mitten,” Becky said in a loud whisper. “Promise you won’t tell her?”

Gabe laughed, and the sound of it reminded me again of the low notes on a church organ—the ones that tug on your heart and punch you in the stomach. The kids all laughed along with him and I knew I’d be fighting a losing battle if I tried to keep them away from him. I gave him his breakfast plate, then slipped from the room to go upstairs and make the beds.

It had turned out to be a beautiful day. The sun was shining, the snow was melting, Aunt Batty had given me a much-needed helping

hand, and it looked as though Gabe Harper might live after all. I knew I should feel lighthearted, but try as I might, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more trouble coming down the road. Maybe that's because trouble had been following me around like Aunt Batty's dog for such a long time that I'd forgotten what it was like to take a step and not have it underfoot.

I smoothed the coverlet on my bed, then stared out the window, listening to the steady sound of water dripping as icicles thawed in the sun. *The snow is melting!* That meant that the snow in Aunt Batty's kitchen would be melting, too! I'd have to figure out a way to protect all her belongings.

As I pondered what to do, I saw Alvin Greer's truck slowly drive down the road beyond the house, heading toward Deer Springs. If the roads were passable, I could drive Mr. Harper into town to see the doctor. But he couldn't very well go in his long johns, and I hadn't washed his clothes yet.

I hesitated, then opened Sam's bureau drawer. My husband's clothes lay neatly folded, as if he'd left them there only yesterday. It was the first time I'd handled Sam's things since he'd died. I picked up one of his work-worn flannel shirts, surprised to find that my grief was gone, leaving a brown empty place, like the spot that's left after you've yanked a flower out by its roots. I held the shirt to my cheek. It still smelled like Sam. But when I tried to picture his face I couldn't recall it. Maybe that was part of my punishment. Maybe all of my troubles were my punishment for lying to Sam like I did.

Even so, I missed him. Not just because the kids needed a daddy or because of all the work I had to do now that he was gone, or even because of all the loneliness he'd left behind. But because Sam had truly loved me. I was always very certain of that. He loved me. And I missed feeling loved.

I chose a clean set of clothes for Mr. Harper to wear and closed the

drawer again. On my way past Becky's room I stopped to make up her bed, but it was already made. Aunt Batty's work, no doubt. Then I spied the photograph she'd brought from home sitting on Becky's dresser. I picked up the brass frame and studied the picture.

A pleasant-looking man about thirty-some years old sat slumped on a chair in front of Aunt Batty's cottage with a blanket over his legs. He was an invalid, thin and ill-looking, with dark, mournful eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. The young woman who stood behind him had rested her hand on his shoulder, and he had lifted his own hand to tenderly cover hers. He wore a wedding ring on his finger. The girl stood in a bashful pose. Her head, which had a circle of flowers on it, was tilted away from the camera, and her round shoulders slouched forward. She was barefooted. I looked at her closely—it was a plump, youthful Aunt Batty.

Hadn't she just told me that she'd once taken care of an invalid, shaving him and all? I looked at their joined hands, then at their faces again, and thought I saw in their expressions much more than a nurse and her patient.

Secrets.

Heaven knows I had plenty of my own. Gabe Harper obviously had his secrets. Why not Aunt Batty, too? I thought of a sermon about secrets I'd once heard in a church in Montgomery, Alabama, and I shuddered. The preacher had scared me half to death with his frightening words: *"You may be sure that your sin will find you out!"* I pictured sin like a long-nosed bloodhound, tracking you wherever you went, sniffing your trail of misdeeds, baying out loud for all the world to hear once it had you up a tree.

I set Aunt Batty's photograph back where I'd found it and went downstairs. Everyone was still crowded in Gabe's room, laughing.

"I hate to break up this party," I said crossly, sticking my head in the door, "but the snow is melting. Aunt Batty, you and the kids had



better get down to your cottage and pack up some of your things or they're going to get ruined."

"Oh, we were just talking about my roof," she said as gleefully as a child. "Don't worry, Gabe says he'll fix it for me."

I lost my temper. Was I the only responsible adult around here? "Mr. Harper has just taken one tiny step back from death's door. He isn't about to be climbing up on your roof anytime soon. And even if he could get up there, that roof is going to take a lot more than a day's work to fix."

Gabe looked away. The cheerful smile disappeared from Aunt Batty's face. Even my kids started ducking their heads and shuffling their feet. I felt like the thundercloud that had just poured rain on their picnic.

"Then I guess we'd better get busy," Aunt Batty said quietly. "Come on." She made a sweeping motion with her arm, and the dog, both cats, and all three kids followed her out of the room like she was the Pied Piper. I was left alone with Gabe.

"I know that I'm still not completely well," he said, fingering the mitten Arabella had left behind. "I'm sorry if I misled Aunt Batty about her roof. I didn't mean to."

Something about the easy way he said her name struck me as wrong. It was one thing for her own family to call her "Batty," but it seemed wrong for a stranger to do it. We stared at each other in silence for a moment before I remembered Sam's clothes.

"Here. Speaking of getting better, I think the roads are thawing out, too. If you can get yourself dressed, I'll drive you to Deer Springs to see the doctor."

"No! Thank you, ma'am, but no!" His answer came so swiftly, so forcefully, he startled me. It was like I'd offered to take him to a voodoo witch doctor for treatment. As Aunt Peanut used to say, "something smelled fishy." I waited, my hands on my hips, letting my

silence demand an explanation from him.

“I...uh...I don’t have any money,” he finally said. “I can’t pay for a doctor.”

“That doesn’t matter. Dr. Gilbert is real nice about letting folks pay any way they can. I could bring him a chicken and some eggs and milk—”

“No! Thank you, but you’ve done too much for me already. As it stands, I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you for saving my life.”

I gestured impatiently. “Fiddlesticks! I plan to get plenty of work out of you once you’re feeling better—like fixing Aunt Batty’s roof, for one thing. I’m just not sure you’re out of the woods yet, and I’d rest easier if you’d let a doctor take a look at your leg.”

“I’ll be fine.”

I could see by the way he stuck out his chin and held my eyes with his own that he wasn’t going to budge. As I stared back, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was more than the money he was worried about. A funny feeling suddenly shivered through me— what if he really *was* an angel? What if a doctor would be able to tell somehow?

I shook myself to dismiss such a silly thought. There were no such things as angels.

“Listen, if you’re sure you don’t want to see a doctor, then I’d better go help Aunt Batty for a while. Can I get you anything before I leave?”

“No, thank you.” He sank back against the pillows, and I could see that he’d used up all his strength. I put Sam’s clothes on the dresser top and left Gabe alone to rest.

I spent most of the day hauling stuff up the hill from Aunt Batty’s cottage to my house. I’d loaded my father-in-law’s truck with empty apple crates and driven them down there, thinking she could pack up her things and store them in her bedroom where they would stay dry. But Aunt Batty had insisted on bringing all of her most precious books up here. This old farmhouse was already cluttered to the rafters with

stuff, since it had been in Sam's family for so many years, but now I had books piled everywhere, too. When we ran out of space in the other rooms, I stacked a load of books in the spare room with Mr. Harper. The commotion woke him up. He stared at the boxes in amazement.

"Where does Aunt Batty live? In the public library?"

"Oh, you don't know the half of it!" I said, leaning against the doorframe to rest. "These are just her *special* books. There are twice as many still down there that she didn't make us bring."

"I guess we won't run out of reading material any time soon." He smiled and acted all polite and friendly, but for some reason I was afraid to be friendly in return. It wasn't that I didn't trust him—my instincts told me that he was perfectly trustworthy. But I found myself getting snappish with him for the same unknown reason that I always barked at my kids when I didn't really mean to.

"Help yourself," I said, turning away. "I certainly don't have time to read."

Toward evening Mr. Harper's fever went back up a little bit, but it wasn't nearly as high as it had been the past few days. "I know just the thing to cool him off," Aunt Batty said after we finished washing the supper dishes. She should have been tuckered out from all the work we'd done that day, but she put on her coat and a pair of boots and disappeared out the back door with a kerosene lantern. She was gone for such a long time that I just about gave her up for lost. But she finally reappeared, all out of breath, lugging a crazy-looking bucket with a crank on top. The kids crowded around to see the mysterious contraption.

"It's an ice-cream churn," she announced. "You kids like ice cream?" They stared at her, all wide-eyed and slack-mouthed as if she'd just offered them a trip to the moon for a slice of green cheese. I don't think they'd eaten ice cream but once or twice in their whole

lives, what with Grandpa Wyatt running things the way he did.

Aunt Batty soon had everyone buzzing around like a hive of worker bees with herself as the queen. “You run down to the cellar and fetch me a jar of your mama’s canned peaches,” she told Luke. “You grab your mittens, boy, and fill this full of snow,” she said, handing Jimmy a pail. She turned to Becky and me. “We’re going to need some fresh cream, some sugar, and some pickling salt. You have any pickling salt, Toots?”

When she had everything ready, Aunt Batty set the churn right outside Gabe’s bedroom, opening the door wide and propping him up in bed so he could watch. The kids squabbled over who was going to crank the handle, so Aunt Batty got the egg timer and made them all take turns. Not one to waste time, she took out her knitting needles and a ball of yarn and began casting-on stitches while they churned.

“Whatcha making?” Becky asked her.

“Well, I thought maybe Gabe could use a new pair of socks, seeing as how his have so many holes in the toes.”

“When you finish the socks,” Becky asked, “could you knit Arabella some new kittens? Mama took my mittens away from her again, and Arabella wants babies *sobad*.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Aunt Batty said. “Why didn’t I think of that? I’ll start the first kitten right now. What color shall we make him?”

I shook my head as Becky sorted through balls of yarn in Aunt Batty’s knitting basket, picking out two brown kittens and a white one. Now my children were losing their minds, too.

When the ice cream was finally ready, the kids started all hollering at once. “Let me taste! No, me first! Let me try it!”

“I think we should let Mr. Harper have the first taste,” Aunt Batty decided. “He’s our guest, after all, and we’re making it to cool his fever, remember?” She scooped some into a bowl and brought it to

Gabe. The kids' tongues hung nearly down to the floor as he closed his eyes and savored the first bite.

"Mmm...Mmm! I believe I must have died and gone to heaven!" he said. "I've never tasted anything this good here on earth!"

The kids did more hopping around than a flea circus as they waited for Aunt Batty to dish up their portions. I tasted mine and discovered that Gabe was right—it was the most delicious thing I'd eaten in a long, long time.

"Do angels eat ice cream up in heaven, Mr. Harper?" Becky asked after she'd eaten a few bites.

"My daddy's up in heaven and he would really like this," Jimmy added.

What little I could see of Gabe's pale, bearded cheeks flushed bright pink. "I...uh...I didn't mean it that way. I'm not really—"

"Of course they do," Aunt Batty cut in. "The Bible says that heaven is paradise, and how in the world could any place be paradise without ice cream?"

"Or candy," Jimmy said.

"And kitty cats." Becky bent to let Arabella lick ice cream off her fingers. "Heaven must have kitty cats."

"F-fishing holes."

Luke's voice was so soft I wasn't sure if I'd heard right or not. But then I remembered the lazy summer evenings when Sam had taken his sons fishing. Luke must be remembering them, too.

"Yeah, our daddy liked to go fishing," Jimmy said. "Will they let him go fishing up in heaven?"

"It's paradise!" Aunt Batty exclaimed, her arms spread wide. And that seemed to answer all of their questions. "Who wants more ice cream?"

Between the six of us we finished off the entire batch. Gabe said he felt cured for certain, but I touched his brow and it still felt warmer

than it should. Aunt Batty decided to top off the evening by reading us some “literature,” as she called it. Now, I’d read the poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow before, but I’d never noticed how much dying there was in all of them—the blacksmith’s wife in “The Village Blacksmith,” the sea captain’s little girl in “The Wreck of the Hesperus.” When I’d listened to all I could stand, I chased the kids up to bed, then lit into Aunt Batty like an angry mama bear.

“I don’t ever want you reading poems about sadness and dying to my kids again, you hear me? We’ve seen enough death!” My harsh words bounced right off her like hail off a tin roof.

“Dying is simply part of living, Toots.” Her childlike smile never left her face as her knitting needles flew. “Everything in the whole world has to die sometime. That’s the way God made things.”

“Then I don’t think God cares about life very much.”

“Oh, that’s not true!” Her knitting fell to the floor as she stood and gripped my arm. Concern was written all over her face. “Life is very precious to God. That’s why He made it so fragile and so short.”

“That makes absolutely no sense.”

“Yes, it does. He made it fragile so we would treasure it, just like He does. You’re not nearly as careful with your cast-iron frying pans as you are with your good china, are you? God wanted life to be precious to us—so He made it as frail as fine china.”

I sat at the kitchen table that night after everyone else had gone to bed, knowing I wouldn’t be able to sleep. Aunt Batty’s words rankled me, like a sliver that was too deep to dig out. Why hadn’t I treasured my husband’s life while I had the chance? Why had I taken him for granted and used him like...like an old castiron frying pan? I didn’t have any answers, only regrets, so I finally decided to go up to bed. But when I stood up, the first thing I saw was Gabe Harper’s burlap bag and I remembered that I hadn’t finished reading that last story of his.

I pulled out the notebook labeled *Prodigal Son* and found the place where I'd left off:

I said that Simon was my only brother, but that's not quite true. Three of us brothers grew up together on the farm. Johnny was the youngest, I was the oldest, and Simon was in the middle. For reasons I've never understood, Johnny was my father's favorite. Johnny knew it, too, and he lorded it over us.

"I'll tell Pa!" he would threaten when things didn't go his way. It wasn't an idle threat, either. If Johnny complained to my father, Simon and I would pay the consequences with our own hides.

While Johnny was his favorite, my father could barely stand to look at me. I never understood why. Hard as I tried, I could never please him. My youngest brother won his love by doing nothing at all, while I seemed to earn his wrath by simply existing.

The Bible says Joseph was his father's favorite and his brothers hated him so much they couldn't speak a kind word to him. I felt the same way toward Johnny. When the opportunity arose, Joseph's brothers got rid of him for good. I did the same thing. Johnny is dead. And I'm the one who killed him.

It happened on a cold December day just after Thanksgiving. Snow had fallen the night before—about six or seven inches worth—so Simon and I decided to go sledding down the hill near the pond. Of course, Johnny tagged along after us like he always did, spoiling our fun and making us pull him up the hill again each time. After a while Simon got tired of listening to Johnny wheedle and whine, and he headed home. I wanted to go with him, but I knew Johnny would follow me, so I grabbed his sled and gave it a hard shove, sliding it out into the middle

of the pond. I figured I could make my getaway while he went after it.

Johnny started bawling. “Go get it for me or I’ll tell Pa what you did!”

“Get it yourself.”

I knew Johnny was terrified of falling through the ice. He wouldn’t even lace up his skates until Simon and I had skated around the whole pond a couple of times to make sure it was safe. He was afraid of the pond in the summertime, too, because he couldn’t swim very well. He never could get up the nerve to jump off the rope swing. Now I saw him looking back and forth from me to his sled and I knew he was scared spitless. “You’re a scaredy-cat!” I taunted. “A lily-livered baby!”

“I am not!” His voice grated on me the way fingernails on a blackboard grate on other people.

“Are too! You’ve got a yellow stripe down your back a mile wide! You’re scared stiff to step one foot out onto that ice and fetch your stupid sled.”

“I am not!”

“Then prove it! I dare you!” I crossed my arms and glared at him. “I *doubledare* you!” I loved to make Johnny squirm. I watched him walk a few steps out past the shoreline and stop.

“Is it safe?”

The truth was, I didn’t know. The weather hadn’t turned really cold yet. But hatred makes you say all kinds of things that aren’t true. “What do you think, dummy? Your sled didn’t sink, did it?”

He took a few more tentative steps. The snow made an odd crunching sound beneath his feet. I laughed cruelly.

“You’re such a chicken!”



“I am not!” His voice sounded shaky, like he was riding in the back of a wagon down a bumpy road.

“Then why don’t you walk out there and get your sled?” I turned my back and strode away. He would dither around for who knows how long before making up his mind. Meanwhile, I could disappear and be rid of him.

I heard that strange snow-crunching sound behind me as I started up the hill. I didn’t know if Johnny was walking farther out onto the pond or retracing his steps. I didn’t care.

Suddenly the sound changed. I heard an eerie creaking noise, like an old wooden floor in a haunted house. It was the most horrifying sound I’ve ever heard. The creaking grew louder and faster, like kindling catching fire. Johnny screamed.

I whirled in time to see the ice give way. Johnny went under, his arms flailing uselessly. Then his scream was extinguished as he vanished beneath the fractured surface, disappearing into the coal black water.

It was the most horrible moment of my life—one I’ve relived a thousand times since that day. I wished I could go back and do things differently, wished it had been me that had died instead of Johnny.

My father doesn’t know the truth about his death. Only one other person knows, and I don’t think she’ll ever tell. But I’ve been cursed like Cain—condemned to wander the earth for killing my brother.

I stopped reading as a chill shivered through me. Was this a true story? Was this the reason Gabriel Harper wandered all over the country like a tramp?

I felt guilty for reading his private journal. It seemed like I was reading Gabe’s mind and his heart. But I just couldn’t help myself. I

skipped ahead to another place and continued to read:

My father always held the standards of the Bible over our heads, demanding we live up to them, but he never judged himself in the same light. He was really two different men. To folks in town he was the most successful farmer in the county, a respected elder at our church, a benefactor to missionaries in China and Africa. But to his family he was another man altogether. We felt the flames of his terrible temper, as hot and swift as a brush fire, sweeping down out of nowhere and raging out of control in a flash, reducing what was green and sweet just moments earlier into blackened ash and stubble.

I observed the difference his presence made on my mother. The only time I heard her gentle laughter or saw her beautiful smile was when he wasn't around—then she would sometimes swing me up into her arms and dance with me, humming popular songs as we waltzed around the parlor. But as soon as my father appeared she became wary and furtive, cowering like a beaten dog, though I never saw him lay a hand on her.

When I discovered that my own temper was just as swift and deadly as his, it terrified me. I hated the thought that I was like him in any way. I hated my father, and so I hated myself for being his son.

The night I found out that I wasn't his son, that he wasn't my real father, I felt born again—alive and free, knowing that not one drop of his despised blood flowed in my veins.

But then the truth of what my mother had done slowly sank in. Why had she subjected me to his cruelty all those years if I wasn't his real son? How could she have watched him rage at me, scorn and ridicule me, beat me without mercy, when he had no right? She had assured me of her love and I had

believed her. I'd trusted her with childlike faith. Now I felt betrayed by her.

I closed Gabe Harper's notebook with shaking hands. I remembered my own mother's betrayal and it seemed like I could hear her voice just as clear as could be: *"You know I love you more than anything in the whole wide world, don't you, Sugarbaby?"*

I was sorry I had ever opened Gabe's book. He had stripped my heart bare beside his own. Later, as I lay in bed, a storm of feelings howled through me like the wind in the snowstorm, emotions too raw and biting to stand up against. Even with Winky alongside me for company that night, it was a long time before I fell asleep.

## ~ Hoofstuk drie ~

Toe ek die volgende oggend wakker word, ruik ek koffie. Sonlig val by my kamervenster in asof dit al middag is. Ek spring uit die bed uit toe ek besef hoekom – ek het verslaap!

Hoe kon ek so 'n simpel ding doen? Ek trek aan so gou ek kan. Ek het kinders om te versorg, dinge om te doen. Ek drafstap verby die ander slaapkamers en sien my kinders is reeds wakker. Wie weet watter stoutigheid hulle teen hierdie tyd aangevang het?

Ek gaan haastig af ondertoe, maar steek dan in die kombuisdeur vas. Tannie Batty staan by die stoof en sing “Genade onbeskryflik groot” terwyl sy plaatkoekies omdraai. Sy het 'n geel trui aan wat sy waarskynlik self gebrei het en dit is byna net so helder soos die son wat buite skyn. Al drie kinders sit by die tafel en verorber die plaatkoekies wat in appelbotter dryf net so vinnig as wat sy dit kan bak. Selfs Becky sit en eet, haar mond so vol dat haar wange bol staan. Die melkemmery is vol, daar is eiers in die mandjie, die kolebak is vol en in albei stowe brand 'n heerlike vuurtjie wat die huis warm maak. Ek trek my vingers deur my deurmekaar hare en sak op 'n stoel neer. Ek voel lam.

“Jy moes my kom roep het. Ek het nie besef dit is al so laat nie ... Ek het seker vergeet om my wekker te stel.”

Tannie Batty grinnik. “Jy het nie vergeet nie, Toots. Ek het ingesluip en dit afgesit. Winky het vir my kom sê jy het rus nodig.”

“Maar alles wat gedoen moet word – ”

“Is klaar gedoen.” Tannie Batty sit 'n bord vol plaatkoekies voor my neer. “Ek sal nou vir jou koffie bring.”

“Ons almal het met die werkies gehelp sodat Mamma kon slaap,” sê Jimmy. Die kinders is regtig trots op die geskenk wat hulle vir my gegee het. Ek voel skoon duiselig van verbasing.

“Dankie, maar regtig, tannie Batty, jy hoef nie te werk – ”

“Nonsens! Natuurlik moet ek. Soos ek vanoggend vir Winky en die meisies verduidelik het, dit is baie slegte maniere om iemand se gasvryheid te aanvaar, maar dan nie jou kant te bring nie.”

Asof om tannie Batty se woorde te bevestig kom Queen Esther by my spens uit met 'n dooie muis wat by haar bek uithang. Ek weet al vir 'n geruime tyd daar is 'n muis of twee in my spens wat aan alles knibbel, maar

selfs al het ek 'n hele paar wippe gestel, het ek nie 'n enkele een gevang nie.

Esther stap deur die kombuis en kom sit haar vangs voor my voete neer. Dan kyk sy selftevrede op na my, asof om te sê: “Daar’s hy. Dis hoe dit gedoen word.” Dan draai sy om en stap stert in die lug voorkamer toe waar sy op my stoel klim vir haar oggendslapie.

“Dankie,” mompel ek.

Becky gee die dooie muis net een kyk, spring dan op haar stoel en skree: “Eeee! ’n Muis! ’n Muis!” Die seuns lag kliphard vir haar – selfs Luke lag – terwyl sy van die een voet na die ander spring en haar hande vryf.

Tannie Batty tel die muis met die besem en skoppie op terwyl sy haar kop vies skud. “Dié Esther is ’n goeie jagter, maar sy maak nooit haar gemors self skoon nie.” Sy vat die skoppie buitetoe en sit dit met muis en al op die stoep neer. “Esther sal daarna soek wanneer dit etenstyd is,” sê sy toe sy die deur agter haar toemaak.

“Eet sy muise?” vra Becky en ril.

“Natuurlik, Toots. Alle katte eet muise. Esther eet egter meer as haar deel, of hoe? Dit is hoekom sy so vet is.” Sy help Becky om van die stoel af te klim en voer haar dan ’n happie kos. “Ek wed jou jy kan nie jou ontbyt klaar eet voordat jou ma klaar is met hare nie.”

“Ja, ek kan!”

Ek kyk verbaas hoe Becky elke krieseltjie kos op haar bord in rekordtyd eet. Ek begin dink dat ek dalk droom.

Ek proe aan die plaatkoekie en verstaan dadelik hoekom die kinders dit so verorber. Die koffie is ook die beste wat ek geproe het vandat die aandebeurs geval het. Dit kom seker van tannie Batty se huis af, want my koffie is met sigorei gemeng en proe nie naastenby so lekker nie.

Terwyl ek eet, kyk ek kort-kort na die spaarkamer se deur en wonder wat ek aan die ander kant daarvan gaan vind. Meneer Harper het goed gelyk toe ek in die bed gaan klim het, maar met ’n koors weet ’n mens nooit nie. Hy is dalk heeltemal beter óf dood. Ek eet stadig en staal myself vir die ergste.

Toe ek uiteindelik genoeg moed bymekaargeskraap het om by sy kamer in te loer, is ek verlig om hom te hoor snork. Ek stap op my tone tot by sy bed en voel met my hand aan sy voorkop. Dit is koel. Meneer Harper beweeg onder my aanraking. Dan maak hy sy oë oop en kyk na my. Ek voel verleë en onthou hoe openlik ek gisteraand met hom gepraat het, en hom boonop in my arms vasgehou het. Ek hoop hy onthou dit nie.

“Hei,” sê ek skaam. “Hoe voel jy?”

“Beter as in ’n lang tyd.” Wanneer hy glimlag, lyk hy heeltemal anders as die siek man wat ek nog die hele tyd versorg. Sy blik laat my senuweeagtig

voel.

“Sien jy kans om iets te eet?” vra ek toe ek my stem terugkry.

“Die koffie ruik heerlik.”

“Ek bring vir jou.”

“Mevrou Wyatt, wag – ” Ek gaan staan in die deur. “Luister,” sê hy, “ek het gewonder ... Ek weet ek het gisteraand geyl. Het ek vreemde dinge gesê?”

“Moet jou nie bekommer nie. Niks daarvan het sin gemaak nie.” Ek sug verlig, wetend dat hy waarskynlik ook nie sal onthou wat ek hom alles vertel het nie. Toe ek egter sien dat hy steeds bekommerd lyk, probeer ek hom gerusstel. “Al woorde wat ek verstaan het, is toe jy jou pa geroep het. Jy het my groot laat skrik, want ek het gedink jy is op die randjie van dood en roep na die hemelse Vader, vra Hom om jou te vergewe.” Ek wag dat hy weer moet glimlag, maar hy maak sy oë toe en draai sy kop weg.

“Ek sal nou graag daardie koffie neem, Mevrou ... as dit nie te veel moeite is nie.”

Ek maak sy kamerdeur toe en gaan terug kombuis toe. Tannie Batty sing uit volle bors terwyl sy die skottelgoed was. “Hoe gaan dit vanoggend met daardie engel?” vra sy toe sy die koorgedeelte klaar gesing het.

“Hy is nie ’n engel nie.” Ek wil begin verduidelik, maar besluit daarteen. “Dit gaan baie beter. Hy wil graag koffie hê, as daar nog oor is.”

“Is hy honger?” vra sy. “Ek kan vir hom ook plaatkoekies bak.”

Ek kan dit nie verduidelik nie, maar ek voel skielik skaam om meneer Harper te versorg nou dat hy wakker is en weet wat om hom aangaan. Ek gee die koppie en ptering vir tannie Batty. “Vat dit vir hom en vra hom sommer self.”

“Nou goed.” Sy fluister skielik: “Die kinders het my gister van hom vertel. Ons het vir hom gebid.”

Ek voel skielik paniekerig. “Ek wens Tannie het dit nie gedoen nie.”

“Hoekom nie? Die Goeie Boek sê – ”

Ek vat tannie Batty aan die arm en trek haar by die spens in sodat die kinders ons nie kan hoor praat nie. “Luister,” sê ek met ’n kwaai fluisterstem, “ons ervaring met gebed is nie baie goed nie. Ons het gebed en gebed dat hulle pappa moet beter word, en hy is dood.”

“O, ons het nie gebed dat die engel beter sal word nie, net dat God se wil sal geskied en dat ons dit sal aanvaar.”

“Wat is die verskil?” vra ek bitter.

“O, daar is ’n groot ver.. – ”

Ek stap verby haar kombuis toe. Ek wil nie haar redenasie hoor nie. “Becky Jean, kom droog hierdie borde af. Seuns, maak reg vir skool.”

“Dis Saterdag, Mamma,” sê Jimmy. Hy en Luke kyk onderlangs vir mekaar. Ek is besig om mal te word.

Tannie Batty kom agter my uit die spens uit en maak die deur na meneer Harper se kamer oop, koffiekoppie in haar hand. Sy steek vas.

“Genugtig! Hoe laat jy my nou skrik!” sê sy. “Jy lyk soos ’n groot ou wollerige beer wat in daardie bed lê. Hoekom op aarde sal ’n mens toelaat dat jou baard en hare so lank word?”

Ek gaan haastig by die kamer in, bang dat sy hom beledig sal laat voel. “Meneer Harper was siek met ’n baie hoë koors, tannie Batty. Hy kan homself nie juis versorg nie.”

“Wel, ek kan hom mooi skoonmaak, as jy wil hê ek moet. Ek het jare gelede vir Walter versorg toe hy bedlêend was. En toe natuurlik vir arme Pappa ook. Ek het hulle al twee so skoon en glad soos bababoutjies geskeer.”

Sels al was ek op my doodsbed sou ek nie toegelaat het dat die malkop tannie Batty met ’n skeermes naby my kom nie, maar ek weet nie hoe om vir meneer Harper te waarsku nie. Hy kyk verward van my na tannie Batty, asof dinge te gou gebeur en hy nie kan byhou nie.

“Kom ons wag totdat hy beter voel,” sê ek vinnig.

“Nes jy wil,” sê sy en trek haar skouers op. Sy gee vir hom die koffie. “Hier is jou koffie. Terloops, ek is tannie Batty. Wie is jy?”

“My naam is Gabe ... Gabriel Harper.”

Tannie Batty lyk ingedagte. “Gabriel, sê jy? Ek het eens op ’n tyd ’n ander engel met die naam Gabriel geken. Is julle familie? Jy lyk nogal bekend ... ”

Hy lag senuweeagtig. “Ek is regtig jammer om julle almal teleur te stel, maar ek is nie ’n engel nie. Ek is baie ver van een af.” Hy vat ’n slukkie van die koffie. “Mmm. Dit proe net so lekker as wat dit ruik. Dankie, Tannie.”

“Wil jy plaatkoekies daarmee saam hê?” vra tannie Batty. “My plaatkoekies is heerlik, al moet ek dit nou self sê. Ek het ’n geheime bestanddeel. Dis so ’n groot geheim dat ekself nie eens weet wat dit is nie.”

Hy glimlag effens toe sy kliphard vir haar eie grappie lag. “Ja ... Baie dankie, Tannie.”

Dit lyk skielik of hy na iets agter my in die deur kyk; dus draai ek om. Al drie kinders probeer by die vertrek inkom. “Uit is julle almal,” sê ek. “Dit is nie ’n konsert nie. Meneer Harper verdien ’n bietjie privaatheid.”

Ek wil nie hê hulle moet vriende maak en dan die verlies voel wanneer meneer Harper óf sterf óf weer van ons af weggaan nie. Ek probeer hulle uit die kamer boender, maar hy keer my.

“Nee, dis oukei,” sê hy met sy diep, sagte stem. “Ek sal ’n bietjie geselskap geniet.”

Ek gee op en vlug kombuis toe om sy ontbyt te gaan haal. Die kinders het drie plaatkoekies in die bord gelos. Ek sit dit op 'n skoon bord, skep 'n lepel appelbotter bo-op en vat dit vir meneer Harper. Ek is net 'n minuut of twee weg, maar in daardie tyd het Winky besluit om by die groepie aan te sluit en selfs die grys kat het besluit om haar op die voet van sy bed uit te spreid. Voordat ek hulle kan uitjaag, kom spring die gemmerkat ook op die bed met Becky se handskoen in haar mond, asof sy 'n klein katjie aan sy nekvelle rondra.

“O, kyk,” sê Becky. “Arabella het vir jou haar kleintjie gebring.”

Gabe staar na die kat en trek sy oë op skrefies, asof hy nie seker is of hy nou begin dinge sien of nie. Arabella laat val die handskoen op sy skoot en gaan lê dan langs dit terwyl sy spin en sy been met haar voete brei.

“Dit is die mees jammerlike ou katjie wat ek nog ooit gesien het,” sê hy.

“Dit is eintlik my handskoen,” fluister Becky hard. “Belowe net jy sal nie vir haar sê nie.”

Gabe lag en die geluid daarvan herinner my weereens aan die lae note van 'n kerkorrel – dié note wat aan jou hartsnare pluk en jou 'n hou in die maag gee. Die drie kinders lag saam met hom en ek weet ek sal 'n verlore stryd stry indien ek hulle van hom af probeer weghou. Ek gee vir hom sy bord ontbyt en glip dan uit die kamer weg sodat ek boontoe kan gaan om die beddens op te maak.

Dit is eintlik 'n pragtige dag. Die son skyn, die sneeu smelt, tannie Batty is vir my 'n broodnodige helpende hand en dit lyk of Gabe Harper tog gaan oorleef. Ek weet ek behoort lighartig te voel, maar al probeer ek hoe hard kan ek nie die gevoel afskud dat nog moeilikheid op pad is nie. Dalk is dit omdat moeilikheid my al so lank agtervolg dat ek vergeet het hoe dit voel om 'n tree te gee sonder om daarop te trap, byna soos tannie Batty se hond.

Ek stryk my bed se deken glad en staar dan by die venster uit terwyl ek luister na die geluid van water wat drup soos wat die ysnaalde in die son smelt. *Die sneeu smelt!* Dit beteken die sneeu in tannie Batty se kombuis sal ook smelt. Ek moet aan 'n manier dink om haar besittings te beskerm.

Terwyl ek staan en wonder wat om te doen, sien ek Alvin Greer se bakkie wat stadig in die rigting van Deer Springs ry op die pad wat agter die huis verbyloop. Indien die paaie gangbaar is, kan ek meneer Harper invat dorp toe om 'n dokter te sien. Hy kan egter nie met net sy onderklere aan gaan nie en ek het nog nie sy klere gewas nie.

Ek aarsel, maar trek dan 'n laai van Sam se klerekas oop. My man se klere is netjies opgevou, asof hy dit net gister daarin gebêre het. Dit is die eerste keer sedert Sam se dood dat ek aan sy klere vat. Ek tel een van sy flennies



werkshemde op, verbaas om te vind dat my smart weg is. Daar is nou net 'n leë bruin kol, soos die kol wat agterbly nadat jy 'n blom met wortel en al uit die grond getrek het. Ek druk die hemp teen my wang vas. Dit ruik nog steeds na Sam. Toe ek egter sy gesig in my gedagtes probeer oproep, kan ek dit nie onthou nie. Dit is dalk deel van my straf. Dalk is al my probleme my straf omdat ek so vir Sam gejok het.

Tog mis ek hom. Nie net omdat die kinders 'n pa nodig het of as gevolg van al die werk wat ek moet doen nou dat hy weg is, of selfs nie eens op grond van die eensaamheid wat ek sonder hom beleef nie. Maar omdat Sam my waarlik liefgehad het. Ek was altyd baie seker daarvan. Hy was lief vir my, en ek mis daardie gevoel van geliefd-wees.

Ek kies 'n skoon stel kleres wat meneer Harper kan aantrek en maak die laai weer toe. Op pad verby Becky se kamer gaan ek na binne om haar bed op te maak, maar dit is reeds gedoen. Seker tannie Batty se werk. Dan sien ek die foto wat sy van haar huis af saamgebring het wat nou op Becky se laaikas staan. Ek tel die geelkoperraam op en kyk na die foto.

'n Man van iets in sy dertigs sit inmekaar op 'n stoel voor tannie Batty se huisie met 'n kombers oor sy bene gegooi. Hy is 'n invalide; maer en sieklik met donker, droewige oë agter 'n bril met 'n dun raam. Die jong vrou wat agter hom staan se een hand rus op sy skouer en hy het sy eie gelig om dit teer bo-oor hare te sit. Hy het 'n trouing aan. Die meisie lyk heel bedees. Haar kop, waarop 'n blommekrans is, is weggedraai van die kamera en haar ronde skouers hang vorentoe. Sy is kaalvoet. Ek bekijk haar van nader – dit is 'n plomp, jong tannie Batty.

Het sy nie sopas vir my vertel dat sy eens op 'n tyd 'n invalide versorg en hom geskeer het en alles nie? Ek kyk na hulle hande en dan weer na die gesigte, en ek dink tog ek sien in hulle gesigsuitdrukkinge baie meer as net 'n verpleegster en haar pasiënt.

Geheime.

Die hemel weet ek het baie van my eie. Gabe Harper het duidelik sy geheime. Hoekom nie tannie Batty ook nie? Ek dink aan 'n preek oor geheime wat ek eenkeer in 'n kerk in Montgomery, Alabama, gehoor het, en ek sidder. Die prediker het met sy skrikwekkende woorde gemaak dat ek my byna doodskrik: *“Jy kan maar seker wees dat jou sonde jou sal inhaal!”* In my verbeelding het ek sonde gesien as 'n bloedhond met 'n lang neus wat jou volg oral waar jy gaan, aan jou spore snuffel vir oortredings en kliphard blaf vir die hele wêreld om te hoor wanneer hy jou in 'n boom opgejaag het.

Ek sit tannie Batty se foto terug waar ek dit gekry het en gaan af ondertoe. Almal is nog in Gabe se kamer.

“Ek wil nou nie julle partytjie bederf nie,” sê ek kwaai en loer om die deur, “maar die sneeu het begin smelt. Tannie Batty, jy en die kinders moet liever na jou huis toe gaan en van jou goed inpak, anders gaan die water dit vernietig.”

“O, ons praat nou net van my dak,” sê sy so opgewek soos ’n kind. “Jy hoef jou nie te bekommer nie. Gabe sê hy sal dit vir my regmaak.”

Ek verloor my humeur. Is ek die enigste verantwoordelike volwassene hier rond? “Meneer Harper het maar pas die dood vrygespring. Hy gaan beslis nie binnekort op Tannie se dak klim nie. En selfs al kan hy tot daarbo kom, gaan dit baie langer as ’n dag vat om Tannie se dak reg te maak.”

Gabe kyk weg. Die vrolike glimlag verdwyn van tannie Batty se gesig af. Selfs my kinders laat sak hulle koppe en skuif hulle voete rond. Ek voel soos die donderwolk wat sopas gemaak het dat hulle piekniek uitreën.

“Dan moet ons seker maar aan die gang kom,” sê tannie Batty sag. “Komaan.” Sy beduie met haar arm en die hond, albei katte en al drie kinders volg haar asof sy die Rottevanger van Hameln is. Ek bly alleen saam met Gabe agter.

“Ek weet ek is nog nie heeltemal gesond nie,” sê hy en speel ingedagte met die handskoen wat Arabella daar gelos het. “Ek is jammer as ek vir tannie Batty mislei het wat haar dak aanbetref. Dit was nie my bedoeling nie.”

Iets omtrent die gemaklike manier waarop hy haar naam sê, voel vir my verkeerd. Dit is een ding vir haar eie familie om haar “Batty” te noem, maar dit voel nie reg as ’n vreemdeling dit doen nie. Ons staar vir ’n oomblik in stilte na mekaar voordat ek van Sam se klere onthou.

“Hier. Gepraat van beterskap, ek dink die sneeu op die paaie het ook al gesmelt. As jy jouself kan aantrek, sal ek jou Deer Springs toe vat om ’n dokter te gaan sien.”

“Nee! Baie dankie, Mevrou, maar nee.” Sy antwoord kom so gou, so kragtig dat dit my laat skrik. ’n Mens sou sê ek het aangebied om hom na ’n voedoe-toordokter toe te vat vir behandeling. Soos tannie Peanut altyd gesê het: “Ek ruik ’n rot.” Ek sit my hande op my heupe en wag dat my stilte ’n verduideliking uit hom dwing.

“Ek ... e ... Ek het nie geld nie,” sê hy uiteindelik. “Ek kan nie vir ’n dokter betaal nie.”

“Dit maak nie saak nie. Dokter Gilbert laat mense gewoonlik toe om op enige manier te betaal wat hulle kan. Ek kan vir hom ’n hoender en ’n paar eiers en melk –”

“Nee! Dankie, maar jy het reeds te veel gedoen vir my. Ek weet reeds nie hoe ek jou ooit gaan betaal omdat jy my lewe gered het nie.”

Ek beduie ongeduldig. “Moet jou nie daaroor bekommer nie. Ek is van plan om baie werk uit jou uit te kry wanneer jy eers beter is, soos om tannie Batty se dak reg te maak – vir ’n begin. Ek is net nog nie seker dat jy buite gevaar is nie en ek sal lekkerder slaap as ’n dokter na jou been gekyk het.”

“Ek sal oukei wees.”

Aan die manier waarop hy sy ken vorentoe stoot en my vas in die oë kyk, kan ek sien dat hy nie gaan toegee nie. Terwyl ek so na hom staan, kan ek nie die gevoel afskud dat hy oor meer bekommerd is as net die geld nie. ’n Vreemde gevoel kriewel skielik deur my lyf. Sê nou hy is regtig ’n engel? Sê nou ’n dokter het ’n manier om dit agter te kom?

Ek raas met myself en skud dié simpel gedagte af. Daar is nie so iets soos engele nie.

“Luister, as jy seker is dat jy nie ’n dokter wil gaan sien nie, dan beter ek nou eers vir ’n rukkie vir tannie Batty gaan help. Kan ek vir jou iets bring voordat ek gaan?”

“Nee dankie.” Hy sak terug teen die kussings en ek kan sien dat hy al sy krag gebruik het. Ek sit Sam se klere bo-op die laaikas en los Gabe alleen om te rus.

Die res van die dag dra ek goed teen die heuwel op van tannie Batty se huis af na myne toe. Ek het ’n klomp leë appelkratte op my skoonpa se bakkie gelaai en daarheen gery met die idee dat sy haar goed daarin kan pak en dit in haar slaapkamer kan stoor waar dit droog sal bly. Tannie Batty het egter daarop aangedring om al haar kosbaarste boeke na my huis toe te vat. Hierdie ou plaashuis bars alreeds uit sy nate van al die goed, aangesien Sam se familie al soveel jare hier bly, maar nou is die hele plek vol boeke ook. Toe daar nie meer plek in die ander kamers is nie, pak ek ’n stapel boeke by meneer Harper in die spaarkamer. Die bedrywigheid maak hom wakker.

“Waar bly tannie Batty? In die plaaslike biblioteek?”

“Jy weet nie die helfte daarvan nie,” sê ek en leun teen die deurkosyn om ’n bietjie te rus. “Hierdie is net haar spesiale boeke. Daar is nog twee keer soveel in haar huis wat sy ons nie laat bring het nie.”

“Ons sal seker nie binnekort ’n tekort aan leesstof hê nie.” Hy glimlag en tree heel beleefd en vriendelik op, maar ek is om die een of ander rede bang om op my beurt ook vriendelik te wees. Dis nie dat ek hom nie vertrou nie – my instink sê vir my hy is heeltemal betroubaar. Tog kom ek agter ek raak kortaf met hom en dit om presies dieselfde onbekende rede as wat ek altyd op my kinders blaf wanneer ek nie regtig bedoel om dit te doen nie.

“Help jouself,” sê ek en draai weg. “Ek het beslis nie tyd om te lees nie.”

Teen die aand se kant begin meneer Harper weer ’n bietjie koorsig raak,

maar dit is nie naastenby so hoog soos die afgelope paar dae nie. “Ek weet presies wat nodig is om hom af te koel,” sê tannie Batty nadat ons die aand se skottelgoed gewas het. Sy behoort doodmoeg te wees van al die werk wat ons vandag gedoen het, maar sy trek haar jas en ’n paar stewels aan en verdwyn dan met ’n paraffienlamp by die agterdeur uit. Sy bly so lank weg dat ek haar byna as vermis wil aanmeld, maar sy kom uiteindelik terug. Sy is uitasem en sleep ’n vreemde emmer met ’n slinger op die deksel agter haar aan. Die kinders drom om haar saam om na dié geheimsinnige gedoente te kyk.

“Dit is ’n roomysmaker,” sê sy. “Hou julle kinders van roomys?” Hulle staar na haar met hulle oë én monde wyd oop asof sy sopas vir hulle ’n rit maan toe aangebied het in ruil vir ’n stukkie groen kaas.

Met die streng manier waarop Oupa Wyatt dinge hier rond bestuur het, het hulle maar nog net een of twee keer in hulle lewe roomys geëet.

Tannie Batty het almal sommer gou aan die beweeg soos ’n swerm werkerbye met haarself as die koninginby. “Hardloop jy gou kelder toe en bring vir my ’n bottel van jou mamma se ingelegde perskes,” sê sy vir Luke. “Gryp jy jou handskoene, seun, en maak hierdie houer vol sneeu,” sê sy en gee vir Jimmy ’n emmer. Dan draai sy na my en Becky toe. “Ons gaan vars room, suiker en piekelsout nodig hê. Het jy piekelsout, Toots?”

Toe sy alles gereed het, sit tannie Batty die karringemmer reg voor Gabe se kamer neer. Sy maak die deur wawyd oop en laat hom regop in die bed sit sodat hy ook kan kyk. Die kinders stry oor wie die slinger gaan draai sodat tannie Batty die tyd klokke gaan haal en hulle laat beurte maak. As iemand wat nie tyd mors nie, haal sy haar breinaalde en ’n bol wol uit en begin steke opsit terwyl hulle die karring draai.

“Wat maak Tannie?” vra Becky vir haar.

“Wel, ek het gedink Gabe het dalk ’n nuwe paar sokkies nodig, aangesien syne so baie gate in het.”

“Kan Tannie vir Arabella nuwe katjies brei wanneer Tannie klaar is met die sokkies?” vra Becky. “Mamma het weer my handskoene by haar weggevat en Arabella wil só graag babatjies hê.”

“Wat ’n wonderlike idee!” sê tannie Batty. “Hoekom het ek nie daaraan gedink nie? Ek sal sommer nou dadelik met die eerste katjie begin. Watter kleur moet ons hom maak?”

Ek skud my kop terwyl Becky deur die bolle wol in tannie Batty se breimandjie soek. Sy kies twee bruin katjies en ’n witte. Nou is my kinders ook besig om mal te word.

Toe die roomys uiteindelik gereed is, skree al drie kinders tegelyk: “Ek wil proe! Nee, ek eerste! Laat ek probeer!”

“Ek dink ons moet vir meneer Harper die eerste happie gee,” besluit tannie Batty. “Hy is immers ons gas en ons maak dit mos om sy koors te breek, onthou julle nog?” Sy skep van die roomys in ’n bakkie en vat dit vir Gabe. Die kinders se tonge hang byna tot op die grond toe hy sy oë toemaak en die eerste happie geniet.

“Mmm ... Mmm! Ek dink ek het doodgegaan en is nou in die hemel,” sê hy. “Ek het nog nooit hier op aarde iets geproe wat só lekker smaak nie.”

Die kinders spring meer rond as ’n vlooisirkus terwyl hulle wag dat tannie Batty vir hulle elkeen inskep. Ek proe aan myne en ontdek dat Gabe reg is – dit is die lekkerste ding wat ek in ’n baie lang tyd geëet het.

“Eet engele in die hemel ook roomys, meneer Harper?” vra Becky nadat sy ’n paar happies gevat het.

“My pappa is in die hemel en hy sal regtig hiervan hou,” voeg Jimmy by.

Die bietjie wat ek van Gabe se bleek, bebaarde wange kan sien, word bloedrooi. “Ek ... e ... Ek het dit nie so bedoel nie. Ek is nie regtig – ”

“Natuurlik eet hulle roomys,” onderbreek tannie Batty hom. “Die Bybel sê die hemel is ’n paradys en hoe kan enige plek dan nou ’n paradys wees sonder roomys?”

“Of lekkers,” sê Jimmy.

“En klein katjies.” Becky buk af en hou haar hand uit sodat Arabella die roomys van haar vingers kan aflek. “Daar moet katjies in die hemel wees.”

“V-visvangplek.”

Luke se stem is so sag dat ek nie seker is of ek reg gehoor het of nie. Dan onthou ek die heerlike someraande wanneer Sam sy seuns gevat het om te gaan visvang. Luke onthou dit seker ook.

“Ja, ons pappa het van visvang gehou,” sê Jimmy. “Sal hulle hom in die hemel ook laat visvang?”

“Dis die paradys!” sê tannie Batty en strek haar arms wyd oop. Daarmee antwoord sy al hulle vrae. “Wie wil nog roomys hê?”

Tussen die ses van ons eet ons al die roomys op. Gabe sê hy is nou beslis genees, maar ek voel aan sy voorkop en dit is steeds warmer as wat dit behoort te wees. Tannie Batty besluit om die aand af te rond deur vir ons “letterkunde” te lees, soos sy dit noem. Ek het al voorheen in my lewe die gedigte van Henry Wadsworth Longfellow gelees, maar ek het nooit besef hoeveel sterftes daar in almal van hulle is nie – die smid se vrou in “The Village Blacksmith”, die seekaptein se klein dogtertjie in “The Wreck of the Hesperus”. Toe ek nie langer daarna kan luister nie, stuur ek die kinders bed toe en trap tannie Batty dan uit soos ’n kwaai beerwyfie.

“Ek wil nie hê Tannie moet ooit weer vir my kinders gedigte oor smart en

die dood lees nie, hoor Tannie my? Ons het al genoeg dood gesien.” My harde woorde loop van haar af soos water op ’n eend se rug.

“Die dood is maar net deel van die lewe, Toots.” Haar kinderlike glimlag bly op haar gesig terwyl haar breinaalde vinnig beweeg. “Alles in die wêreld moet die een of ander tyd doodgaan. Dis hoe God alles gemaak het.”

“Dan dink ek nie God gee juis om vir die lewe nie.”

“O, dis nie waar nie.” Haar breiwerk val op die grond toe sy opstaan en my aan die arm vat. Haar gesig is die ene bekommernis. “Die lewe is vir God baie kosbaar. Dit is hoekom Hy dit so broos en kortstondig gemaak het.”

“Dit maak glad nie sin nie.”

“Ja, dit maak. Hy het dit broos gemaak sodat ons dit sal koester, net soos Hy. Jy werk tog nie naastenby so versigtig met jou ysterpote as met jou goeie breekware nie, of hoe? God wil hê die lewe moet vir ons kosbaar wees; daarom het Hy dit so broos soos fyn porselein gemaak.”

Nadat almal later bed toe is, sit ek alleen by die kombuistafel, want ek weet ek sal nie kan slaap nie. Tannie Batty se woorde het my ontsenu; dit is soos ’n splinter wat te diep is om uit te haal. Hoekom het ek nie my man se lewe gekoester toe ek die kans gehad nie? Hoekom het ek hom as vanselfsprekend aanvaar en hom gebruik soos ... soos ’n ou ysterpan? Ek het geen antwoorde nie, net berou. Ek besluit uiteindelik om bed toe te gaan. Toe ek opstaan, sien ek egter Gabe Harper se goingsak en ek onthou dat ek nog nie daardie laaste storie van hom klaar gelees het nie.

Ek haal die notaboek uit waarop staan *Die verlore seun* en kry die plek waar ek die vorige aand ophou lees het:

Ek het gesê Simon is my enigste broer, maar dit is nie heeltemal waar nie. Ons was drie broers wat saam op die plaas grootgeword het. Ek is die oudste en Simon in die middel. Om redes wat ek nooit kon verstaan nie, was Johnny my pa se gunsteling. Johnny het dit ook geweet en daarom oor ons baasgespeel.

“Ek gaan vir Pa vertel,” sou hy dreig wanneer dinge nie gebeur soos hy dit wou hê nie. Dit was ook nie ’n leë dreigement nie. As Johnny by my pa gaan kla het, het ek en Simon die gevolge op ons agterstewes gevoel.

Terwyl Johnny sy gunsteling was, kon my pa skaars vir my kyk. Ek kon nooit verstaan hoekom nie. Al het ek ook hoe hard probeer, ek kon hom nooit tevrede stel nie. My jongste broer het sy liefde gewen deur absoluut niks te doen nie, terwyl dit gelyk het of ek sy woede verdien het deur my blote bestaan.

Die Bybel sê Josef was sy pa se gunsteling en sy broers het hom so baie gehaat dat hulle nie eens ’n vriendelike woord met hom kon praat nie. Ek het presies dieselfde oor Johnny gevoel. Toe die geleentheid hom voorgedoen het, het Josef se broers vir goed van hom ontslae geraak. Ek het dieselfde gedoen. Johnny is dood, en ek is die een wat hom doodgemaak het.

Dit het op ’n koue Desember-dag kort ná Thanksgiving gebeur. Dit het die vorige nag gesneeu – so vyftien of sestien sentimeter – en ek en Simon het besluit om met ons slee teen die heuwel by

die dam te gaan afgly. Johnny het natuurlik agter ons aan gekom soos hy altyd gemaak het. Hy het ons pret bederf en ons gedwing om hom elke keer met slee en al teen die heuwel op tot bo te trek. Ná 'n rukkie het Simon moeg geraak daarvoor om te luister na Johnny se gekerm en gekla, en hy is terug huis toe. Ek wou saam met hom gaan, maar ek het geweet Johnny sal my volg. Toe gryp ek sy slee en gee dit 'n harde stamp sodat dit tot in die middel van die gevriesde dam gly. Ek het gedink ek kan wegom terwyl hy dit gaan haal.

Johnny begin toe huil. "Gaan haal my slee of ek vertel vir Pa wat jy gedoen het."

"Gaan haal dit self."

Ek het geweet Johnny is bang dat hy deur die ys sou val. Hy het gewoonlik nie eens sy skaatse vasmag maak voordat ek en Simon 'n hele paar keer oor die dam geskaats het om seker te maak dit is veilig nie. Hy was in die somer ook bang vir die dam, want hy kon nie baie goed swem nie. Hy kon nooit genoeg moed bymekaarskraap om van die swaaitou af tot in die water te spring nie. Ek kon dus nou sien hoe hy van my na sy slee kyk en ek het geweet hy is doodbang.

"Jy is 'n bangbroek," het ek hom gespot. "'n Lafhartige babatjie!"

"Ek is nie!" Sy stem het my geïrriteer soos die geluid van vingernaels teen 'n swartbord ander mense irriteer.

"Ja, jy is. Dit staan oor jou hele gesig geskryf. Jy is te doodbang om een voet op daardie ys te sit en jou simpel slee te gaan haal."

"Ek is nie!"

"Bewys dit dan! Ek daag jou uit." Ek het my arms voor my bors gevou en na hom gekyk. "Ek wed jou jy sal dit nie doen nie." Ek was mal daaroor om Johnny te laat kiewel. Ek het gekyk hoe hy 'n paar treë op die ys gee en toe weer gaan staan.

"Is dit veilig?"

Die waarheid is dat ek nie geweet het nie. Dit was nog nie regtig so koud nie. Haat laat jou egter allerhande goed sê wat nie waar is nie. "Wat dink jy, onnosel? Jou slee het dan nie gesink nie."

Hy het versigtig nog 'n paar treë gegee. Die sneeu het 'n vreemde kraakgeluid onder sy voete gemaak. Ek het wreed gelag.

"Jy is 'n regte lafaard."

"Ek is nie!" Sy stem het beweerlik geklink, asof hy agterop 'n wa sit wat oor 'n hobbelrige pad ry.

"Hoekom loop jy dan nie net en gaan haal jou slee nie?" Ek het omgedraai en begin wegstap. Hy sal vir wie weet hoe lank rondhang voordat hy 'n besluit gaan neem. Intussen kan ek verdwyn en ontslae wees van hom.

Net toe ek teen die heuwel op begin stap, het ek weer daardie vreemde kraakgeluid agter my gehoor. Ek het nie geweet of Johnny verder oor die dam geloop het en of hy op pad terug was nie. Ek het nie omgee nie.

Skielik het die geluid verander. Ek het 'n vreemde kraakgeluid gehoor, soos 'n ou houtvloer in 'n spookhuis. Dit is die skrikwekkendste geluid wat ek nog ooit gehoor het. Die kraakgeluid was skielik harder en vinniger, soos fynhout wat vlamvat. Johnny het geskree.

Ek het net betyds omgedraai om te sien hoe die ys breek. Johnny het verdwyn terwyl sy arms nutteloos in die lug swaai. Sy geskree het opgehou toe hy onder die gebreekte oppervlak verdwyn het tot in die pikswart water.

Dit was die aakligste oomblik van my lewe – een wat ek sedert daardie dag al duisend keer herleef het. Ek wens ek kon teruggaan en dinge anders doen; wens dit is ek wat dood is in plaas van Johnny.

My pa ken nie die waarheid oor sy dood nie. Net een ander mens weet en ek dink nie sy sal ooit vertel nie. Ek is egter net soos Kain vervloek om oor die aarde te swerf omdat ek my broer

Ek hou op lees toe 'n koue rilling deur my lyf trek. Is dit 'n ware verhaal? Is dit waarom Gabriel Harper soos 'n boemelaar deur die land swerf?

Ek voel skuldig omdat ek sy privaat joernaal lees. Dit voel of ek lees wat in Gabe se gedagtes en hart aangaan. Tog kan ek myself nie keer nie. Ek slaan 'n paar bladsye oor tot op 'n ander plek en lees verder:

My pa het altyd die Bybel se standaard vir ons voorgehou en vereis dat ons daaraan moet voldoen, maar hy het homself nooit volgens dieselfde standaard geoordeel nie. Hy was eintlik twee verskillende mense. Volgens die mense in die dorp was hy die suksesvolste boer in die distrik, 'n gerespekteerde ouderling by ons kerk en het hy die sendelinge in China en Afrika ondersteun. Vir sy familie was hy egter 'n heeltemal ander man. Ons het die vlamme van sy verskriklike humeur gevoel, so warm en vinnig soos 'n veldbrand wat asof vanuit nêrens kom en in 'n oogwink buite beheer is om alles wat oomblikke tevore groen en soet was tot swart as en stokke te verbrand.

Ek kon sien watter verskil sy teenwoordigheid aan my ma maak. Die enigste tye wanneer ek haar sagte lag gehoor of haar pragtige glimlag gesien het, was wanneer hy nie in die omtrek was nie – dan sou sy my soms in haar arms optel en met my dans terwyl sy gewilde liedjies neurie terwyl ons deur die voorkamer wals. Die oomblik wanneer my pa egter verskyn, was sy waaksaam en stil, verskrik soos 'n mishandelde hond, alhoewel ek nooit gesien het dat hy 'n hand vir haar lig nie.

Toe ek ontdek dat my eie humeur net so vinnig en dodelik soos syne is, het dit my angsbevange gelaat. Ek het die gedagte gehaat dat ek in enige opsigte soos hy is. Ek het my pa gehaat; ook myself omdat ek sy seun is.

Die nag toe ek uitgevind het ek is nie sy seun nie, dat hy nie my regte pa is nie, het ek weergebore gevoel – lewend en vry in die wete dat nie een enkele druppel van sy afskuwelike bloed deur my are loop nie.

Toe het die waarheid van wat my ma gedoen het egter stadig ingesink. Hoekom het sy my al die jare aan sy wreedheid onderwerp as ek nie sy regte seun is nie? Hoe kon sy toekyk hoe hy op my skree, my verag en verkleineer, my genadeloos slaan, terwyl hy geen reg gehad het nie? Sy het my verseker van haar liefde en ek het haar geglo. Nou voel dit of sy my verraai het.

My hande bewee toe ek Gabe Harper se notaboek toemaak. Ek onthou my eie ma se verraad en dit voel of ek haar stem nog duidelik kan hoor: *“Jy weet tog dat ek jou liever het as enigiets anders in die wye wêreld, nè, my liefie?”*

Ek is jammer dat ek ooit Gabe se boek oopgemaak het. Hy het langs sy eie hart ook myne kaalgestroop. Toe ek later in die bed lê, woed 'n storm emosies deur my soos die wind in die sneeustorm; emosies wat te sterk en seer is om teen op te staan. Selfs met Winky langs my om my geselskap te hou vat dit lank voordat ek aan die slaap raak.



## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**he next day was the Lord's Day. My daddy had always made sure I went to church on the Sabbath if he could find one nearby. And my father-in-law would have made us all walk to church through a blizzard rather than miss a single Sunday. But I didn't live with my daddy anymore, and Frank Wyatt was dead. I had no reason at all to attend church.

I had enjoyed sitting in the pew beside Sam every Sunday morning, just as proud as can be of all the respect people gave the Wyatt family. But after Sam died, the white-washed walls of that little church began to feel like they were closing in on me—like it was Frank Wyatt's church and not God's. No one there knew my father-in-law the way I did. I thought about the words Gabe Harper had written: *My father was two different men*. Gabe might have been describing Frank Wyatt.

Aunt Batty brought her Bible with her to the breakfast table that bright Sunday morning and started leafing through it after we'd finished eating. "We need to read something special this morning in honor of the Lord's Day," she said.

I was about to put a stop to the idea, remembering the poems she'd read the night before and remembering all the stuff Grandpa Wyatt used to read from the Bible about God's vengeance and wrath. But Aunt Batty found her place and started reading before I could stop her.

" 'At that time Jesus answered and said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye

shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light....” ’ ’ ”

She closed the book with a smile. “Isn’t the Lord’s Day wonderful? He gives us a day of rest.”

I pushed my chair away from the table and stood. “I have chores to do.”

“Well, of course you do, Toots. Chores don’t go away on the Sabbath, do they? But once they’re done we can all have fun!”

My kids looked horrified and I guess I must have, too. “Grandpa never let us play on the Sabbath,” Jimmy said solemnly. “We weren’t allowed.”

Even on the hottest day of the summer, he would make those poor kids stay indoors in their Sunday clothes rather than go for a swim in the pond.

“Your grandpa was wrong,” Aunt Batty declared. She was just a little thing, but she planted her hands on her hips and stuck out her chin like she was David taking on Goliath. “The Bible says Sunday is a day of *rest*. It doesn’t say to *stop living*! Come on, now,” she told the children, “let’s give your mama a hand with those chores, then we’ll find a nice, clean patch of snow and make snow angels.”

“Is that like making a snowman only with wings?” Jimmy asked.

“Heavens, no!” she cried, her arms flying up in surprise. “You mean to tell me you children never made snow angels before?”

“Never,” Becky said.

“Well, let’s hop to it then and get our work done so I can teach you how.”

As all three kids leaped into action I wondered when, exactly, I had surrendered control to Aunt Batty. Wasn’t she *myhouseguest*? And what on earth were snow angels?

By the time the boys and I finished the outside chores, Becky had helped wash the dishes and Aunt Batty had stew simmering on the

back of the stove for Sunday dinner. “You coming outside to make angels with us, Toots?” she asked me as she and Becky bundled into their coats.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I need to tend to Mr. Harper.”

When they were gone, I started gathering things to make a fresh poultice. While I waited for the water to boil, my eyes fell on Gabe’s bag again. I’d vowed I wouldn’t read any more of his story, but now I was worried that I hadn’t put everything back just the way he’d had it, and that he would know I’d been snooping. When I recalled seeing a Bible amongst his things it gave me an idea. Maybe he’d want to read from it on the Sabbath. Maybe I could take it to him and admit right off that I’d looked inside his bag. He couldn’t get mad at me for doing a good deed, could he?

I found the Bible easily enough, but then my curiosity had me leafing through it to peek at the dedication page—was Gabriel Harper really his given name? He must not have wanted anyone to know because that whole page was torn right out. I leafed through the rest of the book to see what else I might learn about him, but all I found was a tiny bunch of pressed violets in the book of Exodus and an old sepia-toned photograph in the book of Acts. The woman in the picture was very beautiful, with upswept hair and large, dark eyes that seemed to draw you to her face. Her lips were parted slightly in a faint, seductive smile, as if she’d just stolen a kiss from the photographer. There was no name on the back of the photo, only a date—June 16, 1893. I couldn’t really tell how old Gabe was, but I didn’t think he was old enough for this woman to be his wife or his girlfriend. Was she his mother? I put the picture back where I found it and brought the Bible to him. I had to work hard not to act too guilty as I lied.

“I was gathering up all your dirty clothes to wash tomorrow and I noticed this in your bag. I thought you might want to read it, seeing as

today is the Sabbath.”

“Please leave my clothes the way they are,” he said. It was impossible to read his expression, hidden behind all that hair, but I could tell by the ice in his voice that he was angry. “I’m sure you have enough to do around here, ma’am, without washing my things.”

“You saying you prefer to stay dirty?” I asked, just as coldly.

“I’m saying I can take care of my own things once I’m back on my feet.”

“Fiddlesticks! I have a load of washing to do on Monday anyway, so what’s a couple more things?”

“Ma’am—”

“Besides, they’re stinking up my house.”

I turned and left the room before he could argue with me. When I came back with the poultice to tend to his leg, his Bible was laying on the nightstand beside the bed, unopened. Gabe was staring up at the ceiling with his hands clasped behind his head. Neither of us said a word as I folded back the bed sheet and carefully removed the old bandage.

“This isn’t healing right,” I said when I saw the festering wound. “It needs stitching.”

“Go ahead and stitch it, then.”

I looked up to see if he was joking but he wasn’t.

“Are you crazy? A minute ago you didn’t want me washing your clothes and now you’re willing to let me sew up your leg like...like an old torn shirt?”

“I’d do it myself if I could reach that far. Don’t you sew?”

“Of course I sew. But I couldn’t...I haven’t the stomach for something like this.”

“Maybe Aunt Batty would—” “She’s a half-crazy old woman. You need a doctor.”

“No,” he said simply. “I already told you, no doctors.”

“Why are you being so stubborn?”

“I already explained that, too.”

I felt my anger boiling up like a kettle on a hot stove. “And I already explained that my husband died from a cut that wasn’t nearly as bad as yours. Sam might still be alive today if he’d seen a doctor in time.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss, ma’am,” he said politely, “but this is my decision to make, not yours.”

I wanted to yell at him again, tell him to get out of my house then and go on down the road and crawl under a bush to die, but he was just stubborn enough to do it. I put a lid on my anger.

“Well, if you don’t get this leg looked at you’ll have a nasty scar at the very least,” I warned. “Maybe even a limp in your step.”

“I can live with that. It’ll be a good reminder.”

“Of what? Your mule-headed stubbornness?”

A slight smile crossed his lips. “Of the hazards of traveling the rails without a ticket.”

“And what does that nasty-looking scar on your chest remind you of?”

The words flew out of my mouth before I even thought about them. His smile faded as he slipped his hand inside his shirt and fingered the spot as if surprised to still find it there. He stared at me without answering.

“I...I’m sorry,” I said when I saw the pained look in his eyes. “I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “That scar reminds me of a good friend.”

I pulled my gaze away from his and quickly gathered up all my things. I was almost through the door when he stopped me with his words. “I’m going to pay you back, ma’am. Just as soon as I’m able to climb out of this bed, I promise I’ll pay you back. I may not have

much, but I always pay my debts.”

I slowly turned to face him. “I know you will. I thought we already talked about you fixing Aunt Batty’s roof.”

“That’s the very least I can do. But it’s you I owe a debt to, not Aunt Batty.”

“She’s kin. If you help her out, you’ll be helping me.”

“I know, I know...but you’re the one who’s been feeding me and changing my bandages and...and staying up with me for half the night, worrying. You don’t even know me. I’m a stranger to you—one that smells pretty bad, too—yet you brought me into your house...and you cared.”

I looked away, embarrassed. “I’m just doing my Christian duty, same as anyone else would have done.”

“No, ma’am. Most folks would have left a worthless tramp like me out there to die all alone.”

I didn’t know about most folks, but I did know that Frank Wyatt would have run a raggedy old vagrant like Gabriel Harper off his property in no time flat. Lucky for him Frank was dead.

“Eliza, you need to tell me how I can pay you back.”

I was so surprised to hear him say my name in that deep, soft voice of his, that I barely understood his question. Then the thought came to me—maybe he really was an angel sent to help me. Maybe his being sick was some kind of a test and now that I had passed, God would let him stay and help me run the orchard.

“You know anything about farm work and apple trees?” I asked.

“Some.”

“Then there’ll be plenty of ways you can pay me back come springtime.”

I didn’t know what to do with myself for the rest of the morning. There were still enough of Frank Wyatt’s rules instilled in me after living with him for ten years that I couldn’t bring myself to do any

work on the Sabbath. But to have fun, like Aunt Batty urged us to do? I could barely remember what the word meant.

When I finished in Mr. Harper's room, I put on my coat and quietly went out on the back porch to take a peek at what making snow angels was all about. Jimmy was busy rolling huge snowballs to build a fort. Becky and Aunt Batty were flopping over backward into a snow drift, then waving their arms and legs all around like they were trying to fly. I spotted Luke out in the yard under the clothesline where the snow was all packed down, playing a game with Winky.

Luke would throw the ball for Winky to fetch, but the plump little dog couldn't seem to run in a straight line to where the ball landed. It took him forever to find it, then every time he headed back toward Luke with it in his mouth, his bad eye would cause him to veer off to one side and he'd end up missing Luke by five or six feet. Poor Winky would stop and look around, bewildered and offended, as if Luke had deliberately moved off to one side to trick him.

Luke laughed so hard he dropped to the ground. Tears came to my eyes as I watched him giggling and rolling in the snow with the little dog licking his face like he was a lollipop. What a glorious sound Luke's laughter was! The child inside my son was reborn, thanks to a silly, rumpled-looking, one-eyed dog. Suddenly Winky was beautiful to me, as sleek and as graceful as a real hunting dog.

I remember thinking, *If only this could last—the ice cream, the snow, the little dog and ridiculous cats, the laughter. If only our lives could stay this way, for my children's sakes.* But even on this day of rest I felt trouble sitting patiently at my feet, waiting for me to move so it could shadow me again. God just didn't seem to want me to be happy. I wasn't allowed to be.

I found out the next day just how right I had been.

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First thing Monday morning I fired up the stove in the washhouse so Aunt Batty and I could do laundry. The water was getting hot in the copper boiler, and we had just set up the bench wringer and galvanized washtubs when a shiny black car pulled into my driveway. I recognized the driver, Mr. Preston, from Frank Wyatt's church. He was an elder, like Frank had been, and a real bigwig with the Savings and Loan in Deer Springs. Was he going to scold me for not coming to church anymore? I dried my hands on my apron and went out to greet him, feeling cornered.

"May I take your coat and hat, Mr. Preston?" I fussed as I led him into my parlor. "Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Wyatt. This isn't a social call, I'm afraid." He took a seat on the horsehair sofa, still wearing his overcoat, and pulled an envelope from his inside pocket. His eyes were on his shoes, not my face. "I'm here to talk about your mortgage," he said, handing the envelope to me. "I'm very sorry, but we're going to have to foreclose."

I heard my heart pounding in my ears. "What does that mean?"

"The bank is giving you ninety days to pay this loan in full. The letter explains everything—the terms and the amount owed and so forth."

His words made no sense to me. "I don't understand. This farm has been in my husband's family for years. How could they owe your bank money for it?"

"Your father-in-law borrowed money a while back to make some improvements—plant new trees, purchase a truck, things like that. Farmers do it all the time, borrowing in the spring and paying it off when the fall crops come in. He used this house and land as collateral—that's a typical practice, too. Unfortunately, because of the stock market collapse, Frank didn't get as much for his crops as he'd planned. Nobody did. Then he passed away so suddenly...."



“So you’re saying I owe you this money now?”

“You’re Frank Wyatt’s next of kin.”

“How much money?”

“It’s all there in the letter. He still owed a little over five hundred dollars when he died.”

My mind went flying in a hundred directions like a flock of geese at a shotgun blast. It might as well have been five million dollars. I tried to stay calm and recall what little I knew about business matters. “Will I be able to pay the money back in installments, like a regular loan?”

Mr. Preston coughed, then cleared his throat. “The...uh...The bank has been forced to dissolve. I’m afraid our creditors will need everything in ninety days.”

“Where am I supposed to find that kind of money by then?”

He sighed. “Some folks are holding auctions, trying to sell off some of their equipment. Problem is, everyone around here is in pretty much the same predicament. Most folks owe even more money than Frank Wyatt did. There aren’t too many folks in a position to buy right now.”

“What happens if I can’t raise the money?”

“Then the bank will take legal possession of Wyatt Orchards. They can auction it off to reclaim the debt.”

“But that isn’t fair,” I cried. “This house belongs to my children. They never borrowed a single dime from your bank, and now you’re saying the bank has a right to turn them out of their own home? Just like that?”

Mr. Preston stood, shoving his hands deep inside his pockets, as if they were stained with blood and he wanted to hide them. “I’m very sorry, Mrs. Wyatt. There’s really nothing I can do. I just have the unfortunate task of serving you notice.”

I returned to the washhouse in a daze, as if it had all been a terrible

dream. I couldn't think what to do, so I concentrated on scrubbing laundry as if my life depended on it.

"What did he want?" Aunt Batty asked. "He's that hot-shot fellow from the bank, isn't he?"

"He had some business of Frank Wyatt's to discuss," I said numbly.

"I never liked that man," Aunt Batty said. "He reminds me of a mule named Barney that my father once owned. Barney was almost as homely as that fellow and just about as cantankerous. That's why I would never put my money in his bank. I'd sooner keep it in Barney's stall out in the barn than leave it with him. Come to think of it, maybe I did leave some of my money out in the barn...."

Aunt Batty went on and on about Barney the mule and his stubborn ways until Becky got the giggles and couldn't stop. But I barely heard a word Aunt Batty said, troubled as I was about owing the bank all that money.

We'd finished hanging all the wash on the line and had gone inside for lunch when another car pulled into our driveway, this one much older than the banker's car and not nearly as shiny. Alvin Greer and his wife, Bertha, stepped out of it. I recognized the older couple from church, though I'd never been part of their social circle. They owned a few dozen acres of land just north of Wyatt Orchards. I was willing to bet they were bringing me more trouble.

"I know you!" Aunt Batty exclaimed after I'd invited the Greers into the house. "You're that little Greer boy, aren't you? Alfred...Albert...?"

"Alvin."

"That's it! I went to grammar school with you and your sister Adelaide." She grabbed the sleeve of Mr. Greer's coat and examined it closely, then smiled up at him. "I see you finally learned to use a handkerchief. Good for you! When he was a youngster," she explained to Mrs. Greer and me, "Alvin always had a runny nose and he used to wipe it on his coat sleeve until he had a shiny patch right there."

Mr. Greer's face turned brighter than a ripe apple and I was afraid he was about to have a fit. But just then Becky skipped into the kitchen with a ball of gray yarn and a crochet hook. She and Aunt Batty were getting carried away with making kittens for Arabella, and Becky had gone into the parlor to rummage through my knitting basket for more yarn.

"I found this color," she said gaily, then stopped when she saw we had company.

"Becky Jean, say 'how do you do' to Mr. and Mrs. Greer," I prompted.

"How do you do," she repeated, then started chattering like a Victrola that had been wound up too tight. "Won't this make a pretty color for Arabella's new kitten? Aunt Batty is knitting our cat some babies because she wants to be a mama real bad—the cat, I mean, not Aunt Batty—and I'm going to make their tails." She waved the crochet hook. "Aunt Batty is teaching me how."

"That's...nice..." Mrs. Greer looked as if she didn't know quite what to make of it all. Arabella rubbed against her leg, purring loudly. Bertha Greer was known to be the biggest gossip in the entire church so it wouldn't be long before everyone in Deer Springs heard that the Wyatts had all lost their minds.

"If we could have a few minutes of your time," Alvin Greer said, "we've come to discuss some very important business, Mrs. Wyatt."

"Of course. Won't you step into the parlor? Would you care for some coffee?"

"No, thanks." They sat side by side on the good horsehair sofa where Mr. Preston had sat just a few hours earlier, looking like they both had broomsticks up their backs. I pushed Queen Esther off my rocking chair and sat down facing them.

"We've come to make you an offer, Elise—"

"It's *Eliza*. My name is Eliza."

“Yes...of course. We’d like to make you an offer on Wyatt Orchards, and I think you’ll agree that it’s a very fair one.”

“An offer? But the orchard isn’t for sale.”

I saw the two exchange glances before Mr. Greer continued. “We understand you’ve encountered some...uh...financial problems with the Savings and Loan and—” “

I don’t see how my finances are any of your affair, Mr. Greer. And if you heard it from Mr. Preston, then he had no business telling you.”

“Now, Eliza, don’t get yourself riled up.”

“Everybody in Deer Springs knows the bank is folding,” Bertha Greer said. “Each one of us is affected by it one way or another—some lost their savings, some are having their mortgages foreclosed. If you had been in church yesterday, you would know that everyone is talking about it.”

I let her comment go by, too stunned to speak.

“Everyone knows you can’t run this place all by yourself,” Mr. Greer continued, “and I certainly don’t want to see you and your little ones tossed out in the street if the bank forecloses. So I talked it over with Reverend Dill and some of the elders at church yesterday, and they all agree that I’m offering you a fair deal. A very fair deal. You can ask them yourself.”

I didn’t trust myself to speak, afraid that my voice would come out all shaky or that I’d burst into tears. When I didn’t say anything, Mr. Greer kept on talking.

“I’ll scrape up enough cash to settle your loan as a down payment to purchase this property—all the orchards, the apple barn, the equipment, and so forth. I’ll give you five thousand dollars for everything, paid to you in yearly installments. You can rent the house and the cow barn and enough land for a vegetable patch from me on a yearly basis—subtracted from the purchase price, of course. That way you’ll have a place to live until your children are grown. Now, doesn’t

that sound like a fair deal?" He grinned and it was so unnatural-looking on his usually sour face that he reminded me of a jack-o'-lantern.

"This orchard is worth a lot more than five thousand dollars," I said.

"Well, no, actually it isn't. At the moment, no one has any money to buy it and the banks have no money to lend."

"Besides," Bertha said with a frown, "Alvin and I ought to get a discount because we'll be keeping the orchard in the family. My maiden name was Wyatt, you know."

"Bertha's father and Frank Wyatt's father were brothers," Alvin explained. "The two brothers grew up in this house and the property should have rightfully been divided up between them when old Isaac Wyatt died. I never did understand how Frank and his father ended up owning all of it."

"Everyone agrees that the orchard should stay in the family instead of going to an outsider," Bertha added.

"I may be an outsider," I said, fighting tears, "but my children aren't. Their father was Samuel Wyatt and this land rightfully belongs to them. I'm not about to just hand it over—"

"How old is your oldest boy? Nine, ten years old?" Alvin Greer was beginning to lose his temper, something he'd probably promised his wife he wouldn't do. "There's a lot of responsibility in running a big place like this, and by the time your boy is old enough to run it the way his grandfather did, this orchard will be in ruins."

"Mrs. Wyatt—Eliza—can't you see that my husband and I are just trying to do our Christian duty and help you out?"

"I'm making you a very fair offer," Mr. Greer added.

I stood up, so angry my knees shook. "I need some time to think this over. I'll let you know when I've decided."

I took their coats off the coat rack and handed them back. They

were being dismissed without my signature on the deal, and they weren't very happy about it.

"It's a very fair offer," Greer repeated on his way out the door.

"Good day, Mr. and Mrs. Greer."

After they'd gone, Aunt Batty came to me with a worried look on her face. "Are we hosting an open house today, Toots? Because if we are, I really should give Winky a bath and change my dress."

"No, Aunt Batty. Believe me, none of these *guests* were invited."

"Well, they have a lot of nerve coming over here uninvited, don't they? I never could stomach that snotty-nosed Greer boy. I'm telling you, that sleeve of his would just make you sick to look at it."

"I need to drive into Deer Springs," I said, suddenly deciding what I would do. "Will you watch Becky Jean and Mr. Harper for me while I'm gone? I'll be back before the boys get home from school."

"Sure, Toots. Is the open house tomorrow, then?"

"No. There's no open house." I had to walk away before she had me thoroughly exasperated.

I rummaged through my father-in-law's office and gathered up his lockbox and all his important papers, then drove into town to talk to John Wakefield, the family lawyer. Mr. Wakefield was just about as old as Methuselah and had probably been practicing law when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. But Frank Wyatt had trusted him and that said a lot.

Mr. Wakefield's secretary, who was nearly as ancient as he was, led me into his dusty office to see him right away when I told her it was an emergency. We caught the poor old man napping at his desk, so I had to let his secretary bring us a pot of tea—even though I was too upset to drink any—in order to give him time to come fully awake.

"Yes...yes..." he kept saying, and his head wobbled all around on his scrawny neck like it might come loose. "Yes...what can I do for you, Mrs. Wyatt?"

I told him all about the bank foreclosing on me and showed him the letter. Then I explained Alvin Greer's offer. It was hard to keep from bursting into tears because I was still so outraged that he would dare to offer me only five thousand dollars for Wyatt Orchards and then expect me to rent my own house from him.

"I don't know anything at all about my father-in-law's finances, Mr. Wakefield," I finished. "He never confided in me like he did in you. Can you help me figure out how to pay back that bank loan?"

"Give me a few days to look through all these papers," he said. "I'll give you a call when I've got them straightened out."

"I don't have a telephone."

"Yes, yes, that's right. Frank wouldn't own a telephone. Come back in a week, then."

I left Mr. Wakefield's office feeling no comfort at all.

## ~ Hoofstuk vier ~

Die volgende dag is die Here se dag. My pa het altyd seker gemaak ek gaan kerk toe op die Sabbat indien ons een in die omtrek kon kry. My skoonpa sou ons almal deur 'n sneeustorm kerk toe laat loop eerder as om 'n enkele Sondag se bywoning te mis. Ek bly egter nie meer saam met my pa nie en Frank Wyatt is dood. Ek het hoegenaamd geen rede om kerk toe te gaan nie.

Dit was vir my lekker om elke Sondag langs Sam op die kerkbank te sit, baie trots op die respek waarmee mense die Wyatt-familie behandel. Ná Sam se dood het dit egter begin voel of daardie klein kerkie se wit mure my vasdruk – asof dit Frank Wyatt se kerk is en nie God s'n nie. Niemand daar het my skoonpa geken soos ek hom geken het nie. Ek dink weer aan die woorde wat Gabe Harper geskryf het: *My pa was twee verskillende mense*. Gabe kon netsowel vir Frank Wyatt beskryf het.

Op hierdie Sondagoggend bring tannie Batty haar Bybel saam ontbyttafel toe en begin daardeur blaai toe ons klaar geëet het. “Ons moet vanoggend iets spesiaals lees ter ere aan die Here se dag,” sê sy.

Dit kom in my gedagtes op om die idee te stop, veral met inagneming van die gedigte wat sy die vorige aand gelees het en ook al die goed wat Oupa Wyatt uit die Bybel gelees het oor God se wraak en toorn. Tannie Batty kry egter die plek waarna sy soek en begin lees voordat ek haar kan keer.

“In daardie tyd het Jesus gespreek en gesê: Kom na My toe, almal wat vermoeid en belas is, en Ek sal julle rus gee. Neem my juk op julle en leer van My, want Ek is sagmoedig en nederig van hart, en julle sal rus vind vir julle siele; want my juk is sag en my las is lig ...”

Sy maak die boek toe en glimlag. “Is die Here se dag nie wonderlik nie? Hy gee vir ons 'n dag van rus.”

Ek stoot my stoel agteruit en staan op. “Ek het werk om te doen.”

“Wel, natuurlik het jy, Toots. Al die gewone werkies verdwyn nie op die Sabbat nie, nè? Maar sodra dit klaar is, kan ons 'n bietjie pret hê.”

My kinders lyk geskok en ek seker ook. “Oupa het ons nooit op die Sabbat laat speel nie,” sê Jimmy eerbiedig. “Dit is nie toegelaat nie.”

Sels op die warmste dag in die somer sou hy die arme kinders met hulle Sondagsklere aan in die huis laat sit eerder as om in die dam te gaan swem.

“Julle oupa was verkeerd,” sê tannie Batty. Sy is 'n klein vroutjie, maar sy plant nou haar hande op haar heupe en steek haar ken uit asof sy Dawid is wat



vir Goliat gaan aanvat. “Die Bybel sê Sondag is ’n dag van rûs. Dit sê nie ons moet ophou leef nie. Kom nou,” sê sy vir die kinders, “kom ons help julle mamma met daardie werkies en dan gaan soek ons ’n mooi skoon stuk sneeu waar ons sneeu-engele kan maak.”

“Is dit soos om ’n sneeuman te maak, maar net met vlerke?” vra Jimmy.

“Genade, nee!” roep sy uit en gooi haar arms verbaas in die lug. “Wil julle nou vir my kom vertel dat julle kinders nog nooit tevore sneeu-engele gemaak het nie?”

“Nog nooit nie,” sê Becky.

“Nou toe, kom ons spring aan die werk en kry klaar sodat ek julle kan leer hoe om dit te doen.”

Toe al drie die kinders aan die werk spring, wonder ek presies wanneer ek beheer oorgegee het aan tannie Batty. Is sy nie my kuiergas nie? En wat op aarde is sneeu-engele?

Teen die tyd dat ek en die seuns al die werkies buite gedoen het, het Becky die skottelgoed help was en tannie Batty het ’n bredie aan die gang wat op die agterste plaat vir later staan en prut. “Kom jy ook buitetoë om saam met ons engele te maak, Toots?” vra sy vir my terwyl sy en Becky hulle jasse aantrek.

“Nee dankie,” sê ek. “Ek moet gou vir meneer Harper versorg.”

Toe hulle weg is, begin ek die nodige goed bymekaarkry om ’n vars kompres te maak. Terwyl ek wag dat die water kook, val my oog op Gabe se sak. Ek het myself belowe ek sal sy verhaal nie verder lees nie, maar nou is ek bang dat ek alles nie presies teruggesit het soos hy dit gehad het nie en dat hy sal weet ek het daarin gekrap. Toe ek onthou dat ek ’n Bybel tussen sy goed gesien het, gee dit my ’n idee. Dalk wil hy op die Sabbat daaruit lees. Dalk kan ek vir hom die Bybel vat en reguit sê ek het in sy sak gekyk. Hy kan tog nie vir my kwaad word omdat ek ’n goeie daad gedoen het nie, of hoe?

Ek kry die Bybel maklik, maar uit nuuskierigheid maak ek dit oop om te kyk wat op die voorste bladsy staan. Is sy naam regtig Gabriel Harper? Hy wil seker nie hê enigiemand moet weet nie, want die bladsy is heeltemal uitgeskeur. Ek blaai deur die res van die boek om te kyk wat ek nog oor hom te wete kan kom, maar al wat ek kry, is ’n paar geparste viooltjies in Eksodus en ’n ou bruinerige foto in die boek Handeling. Die vrou in die foto is pragtig. Haar hare is opgebind en sy het groot, donker oë wat ’n mens se blik na haar gesig toe trek. Haar lippe is halfop in ’n effens verleidelike glimlag, asof sy sopas ’n soen by die fotograaf gesteel het. Daar is nie ’n naam agter op die foto nie, net ’n datum – 16 Junie 1893. Ek weet nie regtig hoe oud Gabe is nie, maar ek dink nie hy is oud genoeg vir hierdie vrou om sy eggenoot of meisie te wees nie. Is dit sy ma? Ek sit die foto terug waar ek dit gekry het en

vat die Bybel vir hom. Ek moet my bes doen om nie te skuldig te lyk terwyl ek vir hom jok nie.

“Ek het al jou vuil klere bymekaargemaak sodat ek dit môre kan was toe ek hierdie in jou sak raaksien. Ek het gedink jy wil dalk daaruit lees, aangesien vandag die Sabbat is.”

“Los asseblief my klere waar dit is,” sê hy. Dit is onmoontlik om sy gesigsuitdrukking te lees waar dit steeds weggesteek is agter al die hare, maar ek kan aan sy kil stem hoor dat hy kwaad is. “Ek is seker jy het genoeg om hier rond te doen, Mevrou, sonder om nog my klere ook te was.”

“Sê jy dat jy verkies om vuil te bly?” vra ek, my stem ewe kil.

“Ek sê ek kan my eie goed was sodra ek terug is op my voete.”

“Genugtig! Ek moet in elk geval Maandag ons wasgoed was. Wat is ’n paar ekstra goedjies nou?”

“Mevrou – ”

“Dit laat in elk geval my huis stink.”

Ek draai om en stap uit die kamer uit voordat hy met my kan stry. Toe ek terugkom met die kompres om sy been te versorg sien ek die Bybel lê toe op sy bedkassie. Gabe lê na die plafon en staar, sy hande agter sy kop gevou. Nie een van ons sê ’n woord toe ek die beddegoed oplig en die ou verbande versigtig afhaal nie.

“Die wond word nie mooi gesond nie,” sê ek toe ek sien hoe dit sweer. “Jy moet steke kry.”

“Nou toe, sit dan steke in.”

Ek kyk op om te sien of hy ’n grap maak, maar hy is doodernstig.

“Is jy mal? ’n Minuut gelede wou jy nie hê ek moet jou klere was nie en nou sê jy ek moet jou been toewerk asof dit ’n ... ’n ou geskeurde hemp is?”

“Ek sou dit self gedoen het as ek die wond kon bykom. Kan jy dan nie naaldwerk doen nie?”

“Natuurlik kan ek. Maar ek kan nie ... Ek sal dit nie kan uitstaan nie.”

“Dalk sien tannie Batty – ”

“Sy is ’n effens kranksinnige ou vrou. Jy het ’n dokter nodig.”

“Nee,” sê hy beslis. “Ek het reeds vir jou gesê geen dokters nie.”

“Hoekom is jy so hardkoppig?”

“Ek het dit ook al verduidelik.”

Ek voel hoe my woede soos ’n ketel op ’n warm stoof begin kook. “Ek het ook al verduidelik dat my man dood is as gevolg van ’n wond wat nie naastenby so sleg gelyk het soos joune nie. Sam kon vandag nog geleef het as hy betyds by ’n dokter uitgekom het.”

“Ek is baie jammer oor jou verlies, Mevrou,” sê hy beleefd, “maar dit is

my besluit, nie joune nie.”

Ek voel lus om weer op hom te skree; dat hy dan uit my huis uit moet gaan en iewers langs die pad onder ’n bos moet gaan lê en doodgaan, maar hy is hardkoppig genoeg om dit te doen. Ek onderdruk my woede.

“Wel, as jy nie na hierdie been laat kyk nie, gaan jy ten minste ’n baie lelike litteken oorhou,” waarsku ek. “Jy sal dalk selfs kruppel loop.”

“Ek kan daarmee saamleef. Dit sal ’n goeie herinnering wees.”

“Aan wat? Jou eie hardkoppigheid?”

’n Glimlag speel om sy mondhoeke. “Aan die gevare van trein ry sonder ’n kaartjie.”

“En aan wat herinner daardie lelike litteken op jou bors jou?”

Die woorde rol oor my lippe voordat ek daaroor kan dink. Sy glimlag verdwyn en hy steek sy hand in sy hemp om aan die plek te vat, asof hy verbaas is om dit daar te kry. Hy staar net na my.

“Ek ... ek is jammer,” sê ek toe ek die pyn in sy oë sien. “Ek moes nie – ”

“Dis oukei,” sê hy sag. “Dié litteken herinner my aan ’n goeie vriend.”

Ek kyk weg en maak vinnig my goed bymekaar. Ek is byna by die deur uit toe sy woorde my laat stilstaan. “Ek sal jou terugbetaal, Mevrou. Ek belowe. Sodra ek uit hierdie bed uit kan opstaan, sal ek jou vergoed. Ek besit nie baie nie, maar ek betaal altyd my skuld.”

Ek draai stadig om en kyk na hom. “Ek weet jy sal. Ek dog ons het klaar besluit jy sal tannie Batty se dak regmaak.”

“Dit is die minste wat ek kan doen. Tog is dit vir jou aan wie ek dit verskuldig is, nie aan haar nie.”

“Sy is familie. As jy haar help, help jy my.”

“Ek weet, ek weet ... maar jy is die een wat my kos gee en my verbande ruil en ... en byna die hele nag bekommerd hier by my sit. Jy ken my nie eens nie. Ek is ’n vreemdeling vir jou, een wat nogal sleg ruik ook. Tog bring jy my in jou huis in ... en jy gee om.”

Ek kyk verleë weg. “Ek doen maar net my Christelike plig, net soos enigiemand anders sou.”

“Nee, Mevrou. Die meeste mense sou ’n waardelose boemelaar soos ek buite gelos het om alleen te sterf.”

Ek weet nou nie van die meeste mense nie, maar ek weet Frank Wyatt sou ’n vuil ou rondloper soos Gabriel Harper in ’n oogwink van sy eiendom af gejaag het. Gelukkig vir hom is Frank dood.

“Eliza, jy moet vir my sê hoe ek jou kan terugbetaal.”

Ek is so verbaas om te hoor hoe hy my naam in daardie diep, sagte stem van hom sê dat ek skaars die vraag verstaan. Dan kom die gedagte by my op.

Dalk is hy regtig 'n engel wat gestuur is om my te help. Dalk is sy siekte 'n toets en noudat ek geslaag het, sal God hom hier laat bly en sal hy my help om die boord te bestuur.

“Weet jy enigiets van plaaswerk en appelboorde af?” vra ek.

“So 'n bietjie.”

“Dan sal daar baie maniere wees waarop jy my kan terugbetaal wanneer die lente aanbreek.”

Ek weet nie wat om die res van die oggend met myself te doen nie. Daar is nog steeds genoeg van Frank Wyatt se reëls in my nadat ek vir tien jaar onder een dak saam met hom gebly het. Ek kan myself nie so ver bring om enige werk op die Sabbat te doen nie. Maar om pret te hê, soos tannie Batty by ons aandrings? Ek kan skaars onthou wat die woord beteken.

Toe ek klaar is in meneer Harper se kamer trek ek my jas aan en gaan saggies op die agterstoep uit om te kyk hoe sneeu-engele nou eintlik lyk. Jimmy is besig om groot sneeuballe te rol sodat hy 'n fort kan bou. Becky en tannie Batty lê in die los sneeu en beweeg hulle arms en bene asof hulle probeer vlieg. Ek sien vir Luke verder weg op die werf onder die wasgoeddraad waar die sneeu kliphard is. Hy speel met Winky.

Luke gooi die bal vir Winky, maar die vet klein hondjie kan nie reguit hardloop na waar die bal lê nie. Dit vat hom 'n ewigheid om die bal te kry en elke keer wanneer hy terug wil gaan na Luke toe, maak sy blinde oog dat hy skeef hardloop en dan mis hy vir Luke met 'n paar treë. Arme Winky gaan staan en kyk om hom rond, verward en vies, asof Luke aspris geskuif het om hom te terg.

Luke lag so hard dat hy op die grond neerval. My oë skiet vol tranes terwyl ek kyk hoe hy giggel en in die sneeu rol terwyl die klein hondjie sy gesig lek asof dit 'n suigstokkie is. Wat 'n pragtige geluid is Luke se lag dan nie! Die kind binne-in my seun is weergebore en dit te danke aan 'n simpel, verrimpelde eenooghond. Winky is skielik vir my pragtig, so glad en grasieus soos 'n regte jaghond.

Ek dink by myself: *As dit net kan aanhou – die roomys, die sneeu, die klein hondjie en belaglike katte, die gelag. As ons lewe maar só kon bly, ter wille van my kinders.* Maar selfs op hierdie dag van rus voel ek hoe probleme geduldig by my voete sit en wag dat ek moet beweeg sodat dit my weer kan volg. Dit lyk nie of God wil hê ek moet gelukkig wees nie. Dit is nie bestem nie.

Ek vind die volgende dag uit presies hoe reg ek is.

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Vroeg Maandagoggend maak ek vuur in die washuis se stoof sodat ek en tannie Batty die wasgoed kan was. Die water word warm in die koperketel en ons het pas die handdraaier en ysterbalies op die wastafel gesit toe 'n blink swart kar in my oprit tot stilstand kom. Ek herken die bestuurder, meneer Preston, van Frank Wyatt se kerk. Hy is 'n ouderling, net soos Frank was, en 'n regte grootkop by die bank in Deer Springs. Kom hy my berispe omdat ek nie meer kerk toe gaan nie? Ek droog my hande aan my voorskoot af en gaan uit om hom te groet. Ek voel bekommerd.

“Kan ek jou hoed en jas vat, meneer Preston?” vra ek toe ek hom by my voorkamer in lei. “Kan ek vir jou 'n koppie koffie bring?”

“Nee dankie, mevrou Wyatt. Ek is bevrees dit is nie 'n sosiale besoek nie.” Hy gaan sit op die perdehaarbank met sy jas nog aan en haal dan 'n koevert uit sy binnesak uit. Hy kyk na sy skoene, nie my gesig nie. “Ek is hier om oor jou verband te kom praat,” sê hy en gee vir my die koevert. “Ek is baie jammer, maar ons sal die verband moet oproep.”

Ek hoor hoe my hart in my ore klop. “Wat beteken dit?”

“Die bank gee jou negentig dae om hierdie lening ten volle af te betaal. Die brief verduidelik alles – die voorwaardes, die bedrag wat verskuldig is, en so meer.”

Sy woorde maak glad nie sin nie. “Ek verstaan nie. Hierdie plaas is al jare in my man se familie. Hoe kan hulle die bank geld skuld daarvoor?”

“Jou skoonpa het 'n ruk gelede geld geleen om verbeterings te doen; nuwe bome te plant, 'n bakkie te koop, sulke goed. Boere doen dit gereeld. Hulle leen geld in die lente en betaal dit af wanneer die oes in die herfs inkom. Hy het hierdie huis en grond as sekuriteit opgegee; dit is ook iets wat boere dikwels doen. As gevolg van die aandelemark se ineenstorting het Frank ongelukkig nie so baie vir sy oes gekry as wat hy gehoop het nie. Niemand het nie. Toe is hy so skielik oorlede ... ”

“Sê jy dus ék skuld nou hierdie geld?”

“Jy is Frank Wyatt se naasbestaande.”

“Hoeveel is dit?”

“Dis alles in die brief. Hy het 'n klein bietjie meer as vyfhonderd dollar geskuld toe hy dood is.”

My gedagtes spat in honderd verskillende rigtings soos 'n swerm ganse wanneer hulle 'n geweerskoot hoor. Dit kon netsowel vyf miljoen dollar gewees het. Ek probeer kalm bly en diep die bietjie op wat ek van besigheid weet. “Kan ek die geld terugbetaal in paaiemente, soos met 'n gewone lening?”

Meneer Preston hoes en maak dan keel skoon. “Die bank word gedwing

om te ontbind. Ek is bevrees ons skuldeisers gaan alles oor negentig dae nodig hê.”

“Waar is ek veronderstel om daardie tipe geld so gou te kry?”

Hy sug. “Party mense hou veilings en probeer van hulle toerusting verkoop. Die probleem is dat almal hier rond in die dieselfde verknorsing is. Die meeste mense skuld nog meer geld as Frank Wyatt. Daar is nie juis mense wat tans in ’n posisie is om te koop nie.”

“Wat gebeur as ek nie die geld kan bymeekaarmaak nie?”

“Dan sal die bank Wyatt-boorde wettig in hulle besit neem. Hulle kan dit op ’n veiling verkoop om die skuld in te samel.”

“Dit is tog nie regverdig nie,” sê ek. “Hierdie huis behoort aan my kinders. Hulle het nooit ’n dooie sent by jou bank geleen nie en nou sê jy die bank het die volste reg om hulle uit hulle eie huis te skop? Sommer net so?”

Meneer Preston staan op, steek sy hande diep in sy sakke, asof dit met bloed bevlek is en hy dit wil wegsteek. “Ek is baie jammer, mevrou Wyatt. Daar is regtig niks wat ek kan doen nie. Dit is maar net my ongelukkige taak om jou in kennis te stel.”

Ek stap verdwaas terug washuis toe, asof dit alles net ’n nare droom is. Ek kan nie dink wat om te doen nie; daarom skrop ek die wasgoed asof my lewe daarvan afhang.

“Wat wou hy hê?” vra tannie Batty. “Hy is mos daardie groot kokkedoor van die bank, nè?”

“Hy het besigheid rakende Frank Wyatt kom bespreek,” antwoord ek emosieloos.

“Ek het nog nooit van daardie man gehou nie,” sê tannie Batty. “Hy herinner my aan ’n muil met die naam Barney wat lank gelede aan my pa behoort het. Barney was byna net so onaansienlik soos daardie vent en ook net so befoeterd. Dit is hoekom ek nooit my geld in sy bank gesit het nie. Ek bêre dit liever buite in die skuur in Barney se stal as om dit by hom te los. Noudat ek daaraan dink, dalk het ek van my geld buite in die skuur ...”

Tannie Batty hou aan praat oor Barney die muil en sy hardkoppigheid totdat Becky begin giggel en nie kan ophou nie. Ek hoor egter skaars ’n woord wat tannie Batty sê, want ek bekommer my oor al die geld wat ek die bank skielik skuld.

Ons het al die wasgoed op die draad gehang en is in die huis vir middagete toe nog ’n kar voor ons huis tot stilstand kom, maar hierdie een baie ouer en nie naastenby so blink soos die bankier s’n nie. Alvin Greer en sy vrou, Bertha, klim uit. Ek herken die ouer egpaar van die kerk, alhoewel ek nog nooit deel was van hulle sosiale kring nie. Hulle besit ’n paar dosyn akker

grond net noord van Wyatt-boorde. Ek is bereid om te wed dat hulle vir my net nog moeilikheid bring.

“Ek ken julle mos!” sê tannie Batty nadat ek die Greers na binne genooi het. “Jy is mos daardie Greer-seun, of hoe? Alfred ... Albert ... ?”

“Alvin.”

“Dis dit! Ek was saam met jou en jou suster Adelaide op skool.” Sy gryp die mou van meneer Greer se baadjie en bekyk dit van naderby. Dan glimlag sy. “Ek sien jy het uiteindelik geleer hoe om ’n sakdoek te gebruik. Mooi so! Toe hy ’n seun was,” verduidelik sy vir my en mevrou Greer, “het Alvin se neus altyd geloop en hy het dit met sy baadjie se mou afgevee totdat daar later presies hier ’n blink kol was.”

Meneer Greer se gesig word rooier as ’n ryp appel en ek is bang dat hy ’n toeval gaan kry. Op daardie oomblik huppel Becky die kombuis binne met ’n bol grys wol en ’n hekelpen. Sy en tannie Batty is steeds besig om vir Arabella klein katjies te hekel en Becky het in die voorkamer in my breimandjie na nog wol gaan soek.

“Ek het hierdie kleur gekry,” sê sy vrolik, maar steek vas toe sy sien ons het kuiergaste.

“Becky Jean, sê goeiedag vir meneer en mevrou Greer,” herinner ek haar.

“Goeiedag,” herhaal sy en begin dan babbel soos ’n grammofoon wat te styf opgewen is. “Is dit nie ’n mooi kleur vir Arabella se nuwe katjie nie? Tannie Batty brei vir ons kat kleintjies, want sy wil vreeslik graag ’n mamma wees – die kat bedoel ek, nie tannie Batty nie – en ek gaan hulle sterte maak.” Sy beduie met die hekelpen. “Tannie Batty leer my hoe.”

“Dit is ... oulik ...” Mevrou Greer weet duidelik nie mooi wat om van dit alles te dink nie. Arabella kom skuur teen haar been terwyl sy kliphard spin.

Bertha Greer is bekend as die grootste skinderbek in die hele kerk en dit sal daarom nie lank wees voordat almal in Deer Springs hoor die Wyatts het al hulle varkies verloor nie.

“Ons het gekom om baie belangrike besigheid te bespreek, mevrou Wyatt,” sê Alvin Greer. “Dit sal net ’n paar minute van jou tyd neem.”

“Natuurlik. Kom ons gaan voorkamer toe. Kan ek vir julle koffie maak?”

“Nee dankie.” Hulle gaan sit langs mekaar op die perdehaarbank waarop meneer Preston net ’n paar uur tevore gesit het. Dit lyk of hulle elkeen ’n besemstok ingesluk het so regop sit hulle. Ek stoot vir Queen Esther van my stoel af en gaan sit oorkant hulle.

“Ons het aan jou ’n aanbod kom maak, Elise – ”

“Dis Eliza. My naam is Eliza.”

“Ja ... natuurlik. Ons wil jou ’n aanbod maak op Wyatt-boorde en ek dink

jy sal saamstem dat dit 'n baie billike aanbod is.”

“'n Aanbod? Die boord is tog nie te koop nie.”

Ek sien hoe die twee vinnig vir mekaar kyk voordat meneer Greer verder praat. “Ons verstaan jy het ... e ... finansiële teëspoed met die bank en – ”

“Ek kan nie sien hoe my finansies enigiets met jou te doen het nie, meneer Greer. Indien jy dit by meneer Preston gehoor het, het hy verkeerd opgetree deur dit vir jou te vertel.”

“Kom nou, Eliza, moet jouself nie so opwerk nie.”

“Almal in Deer Springs weet die bank gaan vou,” sê Bertha Greer. “Almal van ons word op die een of ander manier daardeur geraak – party verloor hulle spaargeld en ander se verband word opgeroep. As jy gister in die kerk was, sou jy geweet het dat almal daaroor praat.”

Ek ignoreer haar opmerking, te stomgeslaan om te praat.

“Almal weet jy kan nie hierdie plek op jou eie bestuur nie,” gaan meneer Greer voort, “en ek wil beslis nie sien hoe jy en jou kindertjies op straat gegooi word wanneer die bank beslag lê op jou eiendom nie. Ek het toe gister met dominee Dill en van die ander ouderlinge by die kerk gepraat en hulle almal stem saam dat ek jou 'n regverdige aanbod maak. Baie regverdig. Jy kan hulle self gaan vra.”

Ek vertrou myself nie om te praat nie, bang dat my stem sal bewe of dat ek dalk in tranes sal uitbars. Toe ek niks sê nie, hou meneer Greer aan met praat.

“Ek sal genoeg kontant bymekaar kan kry om jou lening af te betaal as 'n paaient om hierdie eiendom te koop – al die boorde, die appelskuur, die toerusting, en so meer. Ek sal vir jou vyfduisend dollar gee vir alles, en ek sal dit in jaarlikse paaienten betaal. Jy kan op 'n jaarlikse basis die skuur en die huis by my huur asook genoeg grond vir 'n groentetuin. Ek sal dit natuurlik van die koopprys aftrek. Op die manier sal jy blyplek hê totdat jou kinders groot is. Klink dit nie vir jou na 'n regverdige aanbod nie?” Hy glimlag, maar dit lyk so onnatuurlik op sy gewoonlik suur gesig dat hy my aan 'n uitgekerfde pampoen laat dink.

“Hierdie appelboorde is baie meer werd as vyfduisend dollar,” sê ek.

“Wel, nee, nie regtig nie. In hierdie stadium het niemand geld om dit te koop nie en die banke het ook nie geld om uit te leen nie.”

“In elk geval,” sê Bertha met 'n frons, “behoort ek en Alvin afslag te kry, want ons hou die boorde in die familie. My nooiensvan is Wyatt. Het jy dit geweet?”

“Bertha se pa en Frank Wyatt se pa was broers,” verduidelik Alvin. “Die twee broers het in hierdie huis grootgeword en die eiendom moes regtens tussen hulle verdeel geword het toe ou Isaac Wyatt dood is. Ek kon nooit



verstaan hoe Frank en sy pa dit alles op die ou einde besit het nie.”

“Almal stem saam dat die boord in die familie moet bly in plaas van na ’n buitestander te gaan,” voeg Bertha by.

“Ek is dalk ’n buitestander,” sê ek terwyl ek teen die trane stry, “maar my kinders is nie. Samuel Wyatt is hulle pa en hierdie grond behoort regtens aan hulle. Ek gaan dit beslis nie sommer net oorgee aan – ”

“Hoe oud is jou oudste seun? Nege, tien jaar oud?” Alvin Greer begin sy humeur verloor; iets wat hy waarskynlik sy vrou belowe het nie sou gebeur nie. “Dit is ’n groot verantwoordelikheid om ’n plek soos dié te bestuur. Teen die tyd dat jou seun oud genoeg is om dit te bestuur soos sy oupa gedoen het, sal die boord in sy maai wees.”

“Mevrou Wyatt – Eliza – kan jy nie sien dat ek en my man net ons Christelike plig probeer doen en jou wil help nie?”

“Ek maak jou ’n baie regverdige aanbod,” voeg meneer Greer by.

Ek staan op, so kwaad dat my knieë bewe. “Ek het tyd nodig om hieroor te dink. Ek sal julle laat weet wanneer ek besluit het.”

Ek haal hulle jasse van die kapstok af en gee dit vir hulle aan. Hulle word weggestuur sonder enige handtekening om die aanbod te bevestig, en hulle is glad nie gelukkig daarmee nie.

“Dit is ’n baie regverdige aanbod,” herhaal Greer op pad by die deur uit.

“Goeiedag meneer en mevrou Greer.”

Nadat hulle weg is, kom tannie Batty met ’n bekommerde uitdrukking op haar gesig na my toe. “Hou ons ope dag vandag, Toots? As dit die geval is, moet ek regtig vir Winky gaan bad en dan vir my ander klere aantrek.”

“Nee, tannie Batty. Glo my, nie een van hierdie gaste is genooi nie.”

“Wel, hulle is baie vermetel om so ongenooi hier aan te kom, of hoe? Ek het nooit van daardie snotneus Greer-seun gehou nie. Ek sê vir jou, jy sou siek geword het as jy net na daardie mou van hom moes kyk.”

“Ek moet Deer Springs toe ry,” sê ek toe ek skielik besluit wat ek moet doen. “Sal jy vir my ’n ogie hou oor Becky Jean en meneer Harper terwyl ek weg is? Ek sal terug wees voordat die seuns van die skool af kom.”

“Natuurlik, Toots. Is die ope dag dan môre?”

“Nee. Daar is nie ’n ope dag nie.” Ek stap weg voordat ek my heeltemal vererg.

Ek krap deur my skoonpa se studeerkamer en kry sy sluitkas en al sy belangrike dokumente bymekaar. Dan ry ek dorp toe om met John Wakefield te gaan praat, die familie se prokureur. Meneer Wakefield is omtrent net so oud soos Metusalag en was waarskynlik al ’n prokureur toe Moses die Israeliete uit Egipte gelei het. Tog het Frank Wyatt hom vertrou, en dit sê

baie.

Toe ek vir haar sê dit is 'n noodgeval, lei meneer Wakefield se sekretaresse, wat byna net so oud is soos hy, my dadelik na sy stowwerige kantoor. Ons kry die arme ou man waar hy agter sy lessenaar sit en slaap. Ek vra die sekretaresse om vir ons 'n pot tee te bring – selfs al is ek te ontsteld om enigiets te drink – om hom tyd te gee om eers mooi wakker te word.

“Ja ... ja ... ” sê hy die hele tyd en sy kop bewe so op sy maer nek dat ek bang is dit gaan afval. “Ja ... Wat kan ek vir jou doen, mevrou Wyatt?”

Ek vertel hom van die bank wat my verband wil oproep en wys vir hom die brief. Dan verduidelik ek Alvin Greer se aanbod. Dit is moeilik om nie in trane uit te bars nie, want ek is nog steeds woedend dat hy my net vyfduisend dollar vir Wyatt-boorde aanbied en dan nog van my verwag om die huis by hom te huur.

“Ek weet net mooi niks van my skoonpa se finansies af nie, meneer Wakefield,” sê ek uiteindelik. “Hy het my nooit in sy vertrouwe geneem soos vir u nie. Kan u my help uitwerk hoe ek daardie banklening kan terugbetaal?”

“Gee my 'n paar dae om deur al hierdie dokumente te gaan,” sê hy. “Ek sal jou bel wanneer ek alles uitgepluis het.”

“Ek het nie 'n telefoon nie.”

“Ja, ja, dis reg. Frank wou nie 'n telefoon gehad het nie. Kom dan oor 'n week terug.”

Toe ek meneer Wakefield se kantoor verlaat, voel ek nog glad nie gerus nie.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I'll bet you're getting tired of laying there flat on your back all day," Aunt Batty told Gabe when she brought in his breakfast the next morning. I had bought some iodine and other medicines at the drugstore in Deer Springs and I was doctoring his leg. He still ran a low-grade fever.

"Don't get any ideas about moving him all around," I said, "or his leg is going to rip wide open again."

"Do you want me to help you sit up," she asked him, "so you can read a book, maybe?"

"I can do it," Gabe said, pulling himself upright. "You don't need to fuss over me, Aunt Batty—though I appreciate your kindness."

"It's no trouble at all. The Bible says that when Elijah was all worn out the angels took care of him, so I figure we can all use an angel now and then, right? Now, what kind of books do you like to read, Gabe?" She started digging through the nearest box. "It looks like these are all adventure stories. Would either one of these interest you?" She pulled out two books and handed them to him. From the look on his face, she might have handed him a king's ransom.

"Wow! *Danger in the Jungle* and *African Treasure*, by Herman Walters!"

"You've heard of him?" she asked.

"Who hasn't heard of him! He's one of the most popular adventure writers of his time. I loved these books when I was a boy! I must have read them a hundred times."

"Oh, then maybe you'll want to read something else." She bent to

pull out more books and piled them on the bed beside him.

“These are all by Herman Walters!” Gabe said in surprise. He leaned over to peer into the box. “I can’t believe it! How many of these do you have?”

“I own every single book he ever wrote.”

“And they’re all first editions, too,” he said, leafing through several of them. He acted as excited as a kid on Christmas morning. “Look at these—they’re in mint condition! Do you have any idea what these would be worth?”

“Let’s see. Forty-three—no, forty-four books—at a cover price of seventy-five cents comes to...” She started drawing numbers in the air on an invisible chalkboard, trying to do the arithmetic.

“They’re worth much more than seventy-five cents apiece to a collector!” Gabe said. “Especially if this is Herman Walters’ complete works. Don’t ever sell them that cheaply, Aunt Batty. You would be giving them away.”

She looked confused and worried. “Oh dear. I’m afraid I’ve already given them away.”

“You did? I don’t understand. How is it that you still have them?”

“I gave one set to Matthew and Samuel to read and kept the other set for myself. The boys loved reading them when they were young.” She smiled, remembering.

“I did, too,” Gabe murmured, still leafing through one of them. “I grew up on these books. They’re one of the reasons I decided to make writing my life’s work.”

“Well, isn’t that a coincidence?” Aunt Batty exclaimed. “These are Herman’s life’s work! You remind me a little bit of him.”

“You knew Herman Walters?” he asked in amazement.

“Oh yes. Very well. In fact he wrote every single one of these books in my little stone cottage down by the pond.”

I decided it was time I jumped into the discussion. “That’s a little

hard to believe, Aunt Batty. He was a very famous writer, and—”

“Wow!” Gabe cried, interrupting me. “You have all of Betsy Gibson’s books, too?” He had pulled himself over to the edge of the bed and was sorting through a second box of books. “I didn’t realize Miss Gibson had written this many!”

“Yes, she wrote sixty-two of them down in my little cottage.”

“Don’t tell me you knew Betsy Gibson, too?” I said skeptically.

“Yes, she was a very close friend of mine—but you won’t tell anyone, will you, Toots? It can be our little secret.”

Gabe and I both stared at her, unsure whether to believe her or not. As a girl, I had read every Betsy Gibson book that I could get my hands on. They were wholesome tales of spunky young girls who went looking for adventure and love—and usually learned an important moral lesson along the way. I had convinced myself that I could be as brave as one of her heroines the day I stepped off the train in Deer Springs. But could Aunt Batty really have known the author of all those books? I remembered the desk that took up her whole dining room and the huge typewriter, big as you please, sitting on top of it. I dug into a third box of books.

“What about all these other authors,” I said, testing her. “Jack London, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens. Did they write all their books down in your little cottage, too?”

“Don’t be silly! I never met *those* people!”

“But you knew Betsy Gibson *and* Herman Walters?” I asked.

“Oh yes. Quite well. But to tell you the truth, I always liked Mr. Walters just a wee bit better. He was the more adventuresome of the two.”

Gabe leaned back against the pillows and laughed. “This is unbelievable! Your cottage was a writing haven for Herman Walters? Now I can’t wait to repair that roof.”

I remembered the information that Gabe had just let slip and saw

my chance to learn more about him. “I couldn’t help noticing that you carry around a typewriter, Gabe. It seemed like a very unusual thing for a hobo to have. You say writing is your life’s work, too?” His grin faded away.

Aunt Batty clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, are you a writer? How wonderful! What kinds of things do you write?”

I could see Gabe was reluctant to answer, but as he gazed from the book in his hand to Aunt Batty in obvious awe, he finally confessed. “I’m a journalist. I do free-lance work for the *Chicago Tribune* and sometimes for the *Saturday Evening Post*.”

“And are you down on your luck at the moment,” she asked, “or is this your disguise?”

“I was doing research, Aunt Batty. I’m writing about the hobo life, and all the interesting people I’ve met who ride the rails.”

“I never would have guessed!” she said. “You look just like a real tramp with all that shaggy hair—and you even smell like one!”

“Thank you,” he said, smiling slightly. “Actually, I’ve been on the road for quite a while and my story is nearly finished. I was working my way back to Chicago to submit the piece to my editor when I had this little mishap with my leg.”

“Well, as long as you’re going to be laid up awhile,” Aunt Batty said, “why don’t you type up your story and mail it from here? I’ll be glad to give you a hand. What do you need, some typing paper? Maybe a little table to set your typewriter on? We can fix everything up for him, can’t we, Toots?”

“I guess so,” I said. Aunt Batty made it sound like such a simple matter that it was pretty hard for either Gabe or me to turn her down.

She lugged her great big typewriter up the hill to my house that very day, insisting that it was much better than Gabe’s little old rickety one, along with a stack of typing paper. Gabe worked on and off all that week, as often as his fever allowed. He still tired very

easily, and he would have to stop every so often and sleep, but then I'd hear him typing again, sometimes in the middle of the night.

By the time I drove into town for my appointment with Mr. Wakefield, Gabe's story was all finished. Aunt Batty wrapped it all up in a package and I took it with me to the Deer Springs post office and mailed it off to Chicago.

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We have a problem, Eliza.” The first words out of the lawyer's mouth sent a shiver through me. I didn't need any more problems. I had more than enough problems as it was. How could God even think about heaping any more on me?

“Are you aware that your father-in-law was speculating rather heavily on the commodities market?” Mr. Wakefield asked.

“I don't know anything about his business dealings. Is that like playing the stock market?”

“It's similar, but it involves speculating on farm commodities rather than on corporate stock. Unfortunately, commodities traders can lose a great deal more money than they've invested—and it seems that Frank lost his entire life's savings.”

“So there's no money at all? How will I pay back Mr. Preston at the Savings and Loan?”

Mr. Wakefield's mournful face reminded me of a heavyhearted bloodhound. “I'm sorry, but that money will still have to be paid within ninety days or the bank's creditors will take possession. Some folks are holding auctions and selling off their equipment to raise funds. But I have to warn you, with this economic depression we're in, they're not getting anywhere near what the equipment is worth. That goes for farm acreage, too, I'm afraid.”

I was much too shocked and stunned to cry. “So...so you're telling me that...except for the orchard and all the equipment— I'm broke?”

Mr. Wakefield closed his eyes for a moment before he continued. I wondered if he was praying. "I'm afraid it's even worse than that, Eliza. Now, I know that Sam intended for the farm to go to you and the children, but your husband passed away before his father did, so Frank's will has priority. I'm sorry to tell you this, but Frank willed everything to his elder son, Matthew Wyatt. The estate would pass to his second son, Samuel, and his family only in the event that Matthew died without an heir. Frank's will makes no mention of you or your children. Evidently it was drawn up quite some time ago."

"What are you saying?"

"Matthew Wyatt is the legal owner of Wyatt Orchards, not you. Until Matthew renounces all claims to his inheritance, we can't transfer the title to anyone else."

"Matthew! But he's dead, isn't he?"

"Well, I don't know. It's my understanding that Matthew enlisted in the Army around 1916 or '17 and fought over in France, but Frank never mentioned anything about him dying. In fact, the memorial plaque at church lists the names of all the local boys who gave their lives, and Matthew Wyatt's name isn't on there. I hoped you knew where he'd settled after the war so I could contact him."

I shook my head. "Neither my husband nor his father would ever talk about him. Not one word. I always figured it was because they were too grief-stricken. I figured Matthew was dead and—" I stopped, remembering how I'd made the same assumption about my mother.

"Perhaps he is dead, Eliza. But according to the law, I'll need to see a death certificate before I can transfer the deed over to you."

"So now what do I do?"

"Well, I suggest you go home and try to locate some family records. See if the army sent a death notice for example, or if there's been any other correspondence with Matthew over the years, perhaps with a return address. In the meantime, I'll write to Washington. Their



records will tell us if Matthew was killed in action or if he was discharged.”

“How long will that take? The bank wants the money in ninety days.”

“I’m sorry, but this may take some time. And I can’t move forward with Alvin Greer’s offer to purchase since the orchard isn’t in your name.”

I was relieved to finally hear at least one bit of good news. I didn’t want to sell the orchard to Alvin Greer, even if he would let us live there.

“But from what I can tell after looking through Frank’s papers,” Mr. Wakefield said sadly, “everything belongs to Matthew— the house, the land, the tractor, and all the other equipment...even the truck.”

I’d never hated Frank Wyatt as much as I did at that moment. He had not only robbed my children of their father, but now he was robbing them of their inheritance, giving everything that rightfully belonged to them to an ungrateful son who’d left home years ago.

“What about all those years that my husband worked for his father,” I cried, “slaving away in all kinds of weather to help him run that place? What about all the backbreaking work Sam did while Matthew was who-knows-where? Doesn’t that count for anything? My husband *died* working for his father, and you’re telling me his children get *nothing*?”

“I’m sorry, Eliza...I understand how you feel....”

“No, you don’t! That orchard is my home, my children’s home!” I battled my tears, determined not to cry, but a stray drop rolled down my cheek in spite of my efforts. Mr. Wakefield’s eyes seemed a little watery, too.

“Once we find Matthew Wyatt,” he said, “I’ll do my best to convince him that you and your children deserve fair compensation for all the work Samuel did. But realistically, Mrs. Wyatt, you know

you would never be able to run Wyatt Orchards by yourself. Perhaps Frank knew that, too.”

The only thing Frank knew was that I was an outsider, and he hated me for it. This was his way of punishing Sam for not marrying well and adding even more land to his little kingdom. I understood that. But what I couldn’t understand was how any man could disinherit his own grandchildren—his own flesh and blood.

When I reached home I sat out in the driveway in the truck—Matthew’s truck—letting my emotions simmer down before going inside. I felt like spitting on Frank Wyatt’s grave. It was so unfair! I was more determined than ever to hang on to this land and this home that were rightfully mine. I had to find out what had happened to Matthew Wyatt. But the way I felt right now, if it turned out Matthew was alive, I was angry enough to murder him myself.

I started off by searching Frank’s office. He’d kept careful records of every business transaction, every invoice, every receipt for the past twenty years, it seemed. But there was not so much as a scrap of paper with Matthew’s name on it—let alone a letter or a mailing address.

When I finished that search to no avail, I got a stepladder and climbed up to the attic. As I looked around at the piles of discarded furniture, dusty boxes, and old steamer trunks, I couldn’t help thinking about the comment Aunt Batty had made at Frank’s funeral: *“There’s a huge load of grief up in the attic of this house.”* She didn’t know the half of it.

I dug through a mountain of stuff, searching for old photo albums, letters, or any other memorabilia I could find that might mention Matthew. It was much too cold to stay up there for very long, so I carried any box that looked promising downstairs to the parlor.

“Well, will you look at this,” Aunt Batty said, pulling an old beaded purse from one of the boxes. “This belonged to my sister, Lydia. Oh, I can see her now—this purse on one arm and a beau on the other. My,

how that girl loved to dance.”

“Aunt Batty, will you please look through these pictures with me?” I asked when I unearthed a family photo album. “Maybe you can tell me who all these people are.” Some of the pictures had captions below them, written in white ink on the black pages, but most did not. I realized that I not only had never met Matthew Wyatt, I’d never even seen a picture of him.

“Wait, let me get my spectacles first.” She retrieved them, then sat beside me on the sofa with Becky perched on her lap. The three of us paged through the album together. “A lot of these are Frank Wyatt’s relations,” Aunt Batty said as we studied the first few pages.

“I never knew he had relatives here in Deer Springs until the other day,” I said. “Mrs. Greer surprised me when she said she was Frank’s cousin.”

“Oh, there are still a few of them around. You know Julia Foster, the sheriff’s wife? She’s another Wyatt cousin.”

“Is there a picture of Lydia in here?” I asked, leafing ahead through the book. My mother-in-law was another mystery I’d never understood. Both Sam and his father would clam right up if I tried to ask questions about her. But then, I didn’t want to answer any questions about my own past either, so I’d learned to let sleeping dogs lie.

“Let me see....Here, this is my sister, Lydia.”

“Oh, she’s beautiful!” The woman Aunt Batty pointed to was not at all the sturdy, hard-working farmer’s wife I had expected to see. Lydia was so lovely she took my breath away. I stared at my mother-in-law’s face for the first time, unable to take my eyes off her. Hers was a delicate kind of beauty that was both innocent and alluring at the same time.

“You would never know we were sisters, would you?” Aunt Batty said, chuckling to herself.

I glanced at Aunt Batty and saw little resemblance except for the sisters' arched eyebrows and delicate bones. I studied Lydia's dark eyes and graceful brows, her irresistible smile, searching for a resemblance between my husband and his mother. But I couldn't find any. Sam had been powerfully built, with his father's chiseled jaw, fair hair, and blue eyes. Yet something about his mother seemed familiar to me, as though I'd seen her before, even though I knew that I hadn't.

I saw Lydia in several of the pictures on the next few pages, usually surrounded by her three sons at various ages. It was hard for me to look at pictures of Sam when he was young and strong and healthy. I couldn't get over how much my Jimmy resembled him. In nearly all the pictures, Sam stood as close as a shadow to his older brother, Matthew—the way Luke always hangs onto Jimmy's shirttail.

I stared and stared at each picture of Matthew Wyatt. He had his mother's dark hair and eyes, and looked as different from Sam as two brothers could look. But then, the youngest brother, Willie, looked altogether different, too. I knew for sure that Willie was dead. I'd seen his grave in the family plot beside Lydia's and Frank's—beside my Sam's. According to the dates on Willie's tombstone, he had died when he was nine—Jimmy's age. Aunt Batty pointed to his picture.

"This must be one of the last pictures they ever took of little Willie," she said sadly.

"How did he die?" I asked. "I've forgotten what Sam told me."

"Poor child. He fell through the ice on the pond one winter and drowned."

I felt my skin tingle at the eerie coincidence, as if I'd just plunged into that icy water myself. It was the same way the youngest brother in Gabe Harper's story had died.

"Were you there when it happened?" I asked.

She stirred uncomfortably on the hard sofa. "Well, the pond is just beyond my house, you know. I hear an awful lot that goes on."

“Did you hear what happened the day Willie drowned?”

Aunt Batty carefully slid Becky off her lap and gave her the beaded purse to play with on the floor by our feet. Then she pulled a flowered handkerchief from the sleeve of her yellow sweater and began kneading it.

“The three boys had been sledding on the hill behind my house—just like your three young ones do. I heard them whooping and yelling, then it got real quiet. I thought maybe they’d gone home. But when I looked out my window I saw Matthew and Willie standing out by the pond. The boys liked to skate on it once it froze solid. I was afraid they’d try it that day and I knew it was still too early in December for the ice to be safe.”

I felt another chill shiver through me as she repeated mirrored details from Gabe’s story.

“I tried yelling out the door to them,” Aunt Batty continued, “but they didn’t hear me. I went to get my coat and boots—and I was always sorry afterward that I took so long bundling up. By the time I got outside, Matthew was hysterical, screaming that Willie had fallen through the ice and crying, ‘Save him! Save him!’ I had all I could do to keep that boy from jumping in after him. We got help as fast as we could, but it was too late.” I heard the tears in Aunt Batty’s trembling voice. “That poor child...and poor, poor Lydia.”

I was sorry I’d dredged up such painful memories, but I needed to know something else. “Was Willie Frank Wyatt’s favorite son?” I asked.

“It was shameful the way he favored that boy and heaped abuse on the other two. They were as jealous as sin of him, and I couldn’t blame them. Poor Matthew felt so responsible for what happened to little Willie that he kept saying it was all his fault. I told him to hush up! Don’t ever say that in front of your father!”

“Was it true? Was the accident Matthew’s fault?”

“The truth is that Frank Wyatt killed Willie by playing favorites.”

*Only one other person knows and I don't think she'll ever tell*, Gabe had written. My heart began to gallop like a race horse. What if, beneath all that shaggy hair and overgrown beard—what if Gabe Harper was really Matthew Wyatt?

I remembered the way he had stood in my kitchen that first night, reminding me for all the world of my Sam. He had even bowed his head and prayed before eating like Sam always did. And he'd known just what work needed to be done out in the barn. He'd had a guilty look on his face, too, when I'd asked him how he'd known my last name was Wyatt. I shivered again.

I slowly paged through the photo album, staring at Matthew Wyatt's face in every picture, searching for a resemblance to the bushy-haired man in my spare bedroom. Hadn't Aunt Batty said Gabe looked familiar the first time she saw him? And he called her Aunt Batty much too easily to be a stranger.

Maybe that was why Gabe had refused to see the doctor— maybe he had a scar or a birthmark or something that the family doctor would recognize, maybe even that scar on his chest. And maybe that's why Gabe seemed so put out with me when I told him I'd rummaged through his things. He didn't want me to discover the truth.

But why all this secrecy, especially now that his father and brother were both dead? Why didn't he just step forward and say who he was if it was true? I couldn't very well ask him without admitting that I'd read his private journals. Besides, I had no idea how he would react if he found out that the house and the orchard now belonged to him. Would he take it all away from us? Kick us out in the snow? For all I knew, Gabe—or Matthew, or whatever his name was—had a wife and a family of his own somewhere who were just dying to move right in.

“Aunt Batty, whatever happened to Matthew?” I finally asked.

“Matthew?” She glanced around the room with a worried look on

her face as if he'd been here a moment ago and she'd misplaced him. Then she caught herself. "No, that young one is named Jimmy," she said aloud. "Matthew joined the army and went to France to fight in the war."

The war. Gabe carried a U.S. Army canteen in his bag.

Part of me wanted Gabe to be Matthew so he could pay off the mortgage and help me run things, but part of me was afraid that the kids and I would lose our home—and I could never allow that to happen.

"The war ended more than ten years ago, Aunt Batty. What happened to Matthew after that? Do you have any idea? Did he ever come home?"

Aunt Batty squinted in concentration. "Matthew was still over in France when his mother died. I wrote to tell him that she'd passed away. Lydia had given me his address and asked me to write to him before...before she left us...." It seemed as though there was more Aunt Batty wanted to say. I waited.

"Matthew wrote back to me just the one time," she continued. "He thanked me for telling him the news and asked me to please take care of Sam. That's all—just that one short letter. I don't think anyone has heard from him since."

"Do you still have that letter? Could I see it?" I already knew what Gabe's handwriting looked like. I could easily compare the two.

"I don't know if I kept that letter or not. I could look for it, I suppose. Is it important?"

"Yes, it's very important." But I knew I was asking the impossible with Aunt Batty's house in the mess it was in. "If Matthew had died over in France," I asked her, "would Frank Wyatt have told you?"

"Never! Frank hasn't spoken to me since the night he burned my father's house down."

"He burned your father's house down?"

“Yes, he certainly did! He wanted to plant peach trees on that plot of land and my house was in his way. Oh, he tried to make everyone think it was an accident but I knew better. I’m telling you, Toots—as sure as apples grow on apple trees, Frank Wyatt started that fire. I’ve had to live in the little cottage ever since.”

She was describing a history I knew nothing about, and I wasn’t so sure I wanted to know. I had been afraid of my father-in-law from the very first day I met him. Later I grew to hate him for allowing Sam to die. He had always insisted that Aunt Batty was crazy. Now I wondered who I should believe.

“Come to think of it,” she said, “it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that Frank Wyatt made my kitchen roof cave in, too.”

“But he died last November. How could he—”

“Oh, you don’t know him like I did, Toots! He might have sawed through the roof timbers and then waited for it to snow.”

I heaved a tired sigh. I had more questions now than before I started looking for answers. How was I ever going to untangle this mess? I turned to the last page in the album and found the very last picture of Matthew. He looked to be about eighteen years old, standing beside his brother Sam. Behind them was the newly painted sign on the side of the barn: *Wyatt Orchards—Frank Wyatt & Sons, Proprietors*. I carefully removed the photo and handed it to Aunt Batty.

“I need to find Matthew, Aunt Batty. Do you have any idea what might have happened to him?”

Aunt Batty didn’t answer me. Her mind had drifted off to another place and another time. In the silence, I heard a freight train rumbling past the orchard. The whistle’s mournful sound reminded me, as it always did, of all my years of longing for a home. I had criss-crossed the country on trains, gazing at the lights that glowed from the windows of the houses I passed, dreaming of a family and a house like this one. I’d made my decision ten years ago to grab hold of Wyatt



Orchards and make it my own, never knowing its hidden secrets and heartaches, unprepared for all I had bargained for.

But now I had three kids to think about—kids I would lay down and die for. I had to find a way to make a living for them, to keep the home that belonged to them. I had to prove that Matthew Wyatt was dead.

“Please, Aunt Batty. If you know anything at all about Matthew, please tell me.”

She frowned. “If you want to understand what happened to Matthew, you’d have to understand my sister, Lydia, first.”

“Tell me anything you think might help. I don’t want to lose this orchard. I want it for my kids. It’s their home—my home.”

She glanced at me sharply, an angry look suddenly crossing her face. “Are you sure you want to keep this orchard for those young ones? The price is very high, you know.”

“I know. The man from the bank wants five hundred dollars, and if I don’t pay him in ninety days we’ll lose everything.”

She turned away. “Oh, it costs much more than that. It has already cost the lives of the people I loved....”

## ~ Hoofstuk vyf ~

“Jy is seker al moeg om die hele dag so op jou rug te lê,” sê tannie Batty vir Gabe toe sy die volgende oggend vir hom ontbyt bring. Ek het jodium en ander medisyne by ’n apteek in Deer Springs gekoop en is besig om sy been te versorg. Hy het nog steeds ’n laegraadse koors.

“Moet net nie enige idees kry om hom te wil rondskuif nie,” sê ek, “anders gaan hierdie wond weer oopskeur.”

“Wil jy hê ek moet jou help om ’n bietjie regop te sit?” vra sy vir hom. “Dan kan jy miskien ’n bietjie lees.”

“Ek kan dit self doen,” sê Gabe en druk homself met sy arms regop. “Tannie Batty hoef nie so oor my te kloek nie, alhoewel ek julle goedhartigheid regtig waardeer.”

“Dit is geen moeite nie. Die Bybel sê toe Elia uitgeput was, het die engele vir hom gesorg. Dit laat my dink dat ons almal die een of ander tyd kan doen met ’n engel in ons lewe, of hoe? Nou, watter soort boeke lees jy graag, Gabe?” Sy begin in die naaste boks soek. “Dit lyk of hierdie almal avontuurverhale is. Stel jy dalk in een van hierdie belang?” Sy haal twee boeke uit en gee dit vir hom. Te oordeel na die uitdrukking op sy gesig, kon sy netsowel vir hom ’n koning se skat gegee het.

“Ongelooflik! *Danger in the Jungle* en *African Treasure* deur Herman Walters.”

“Het jy al van hom gehoor?” vra sy.

“Wie het nog nie van hom gehoor nie? Hy is een van die gewildste avontuurskrywers van sy tyd. Ek was mal oor hierdie boeke toe ek ’n seun was. Ek het dit seker honderd keer gelees.”

“O, dan wil jy seker eerder iets anders lees.” Sy buk om nog boeke uit te haal en stapel dit langs hom op die bed.

“Herman Walters het ál hierdie boeke geskryf,” sê Gabe verbaas. Hy buk vooroor sodat hy by die boks kan inloer. “Ek kan dit nie glo nie! Hoeveel van hulle het Tannie?”

“Ek besit elke lieue boek wat hy ooit geskryf het.”

“Hulle almal is nog eerste uitgawes ook,” sê hy terwyl hy deur ’n paar daarvan blaai. Hy lyk so opgewonde soos ’n kind op Kersoggend. “Kyk net hierna. Hulle is in ’n uitstekende toestand. Het Tannie enige idee wat hierdie boeke werd is?”

“Laat ek dink. Drie en veertig ... nee, vier en veertig boeke teen vyf en sewentig sent elk, dan kry jy ... ” Sy begin in die lug syfers teken om haar somme uit te werk.

“Vir ’n versamelaar is hierdie boeke baie meer werd as vyf en sewentig sent stuk,” sê Gabe. “Veral as dit ’n volledige versameling van al Herman Walters se boeke is. Moet dit nooit goedkoop verkoop nie, tannie Batty. Tannie sal hulle weggee.”

Sy lyk deurmekaar en bekommerd. “O aarde, ek is bevrees ek het dit reeds weggegee.”

“Regtig? Ek verstaan nie mooi nie. Hoe kan Tannie dit dan steeds hê?”

“Ek het die een stel vir Matthew en Samuel gegee om te lees en die ander stel vir myself gehou. Die seuns was mal daaroor om dit te lees toe hulle klein was.” Die herinnering laat haar glimlag.

“Ek ook,” sê Gabe sag terwyl hy steeds deur een van hulle blaai. “Ek het grootgeword met hierdie boeke. Dit is een van die redes waarom ek besluit het om skryf my lewenswerk te maak.”

“Wel, is dit nou nie toevallig nie?” sê tannie Batty. “Hierdie boeke is Herman se lewenswerk. Jy herinner my ’n klein bietjie aan hom.”

“Het Tannie vir Herman Walters geken?” vra hy verstom.

“O ja. Baie goed. Hy het in werklikheid elkeen van hierdie boeke in my klein kliphuisie langs die dam geskryf.”

Ek besluit dit is tyd om iets te sê. “Dis ’n bietjie moeilik om te glo, tannie Batty. Hy was ’n baie bekende skrywer en – ”

“Ongelooflik!” roep Gabe uit en val my in die rede. “Het Tannie al Betsy Gibson se boeke ook?” Hy trek homself vorentoe sodat sy bolyf oor die bed se rand hang en soek deur ’n tweede boks vol boeke. “Ek het nie besef juffrou Gibson het so baie boeke geskryf nie.”

“Ja, sy het twee en sestig van hulle daar in my kliphuisie geskryf.”

“Moenie vir my sê Tannie het vir Betsy Gibson ook geken nie?” vra ek skepties.

“Ja, sy was ’n baie goeie vriendin van my, maar jy sal mos vir niemand vertel nie, nè, Toots? Dit kan ons geheimpie wees.”

Ek en Gabe staar net na haar, nie seker of ons haar moet glo of nie. Toe ek ’n kind was, het ek elke Betsy Gibson-boek gelees wat ek in die hande kon kry. Dit is heilsame stories van dapper jong meisies wat na avontuur en liefde gaan soek het – en gewoonlik ’n belangrike les langs die pad geleer het. Die dag toe ek in Deer Springs van die trein af geklim het, het ek myself oortuig dat ek net so dapper soos een van haar heldinne kan wees. Kon tannie Batty regtig die outeur van al daardie boeke geken het? Ek dink aan die groot

lessenaar wat byna haar hele eetkamer vol staan asook die groot tikmasjien wat bo-op staan. Ek begin in 'n derde boks vol boeke grawe.

“Wat van al hierdie ander outeurs?” vra ek om haar te toets. “Jack London, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens. Het hulle hul boeke ook in Tannie se klein huisie geskryf?”

“Moenie laf wees nie. Ek het hulle nooit ontmoet nie.”

“Maar Tannie het vir Betsy Gibson én Herman Walters geken?” vra ek.

“O ja, en goed ook. As ek eerlik moet wees, moet ek erken dat ek altyd 'n klein bietjie meer van meneer Walters gehou het. Hy was die meer avontuurlistige een van die twee.”

Gabe gaan sit weer teen die kussings en lag. “Dit is ongelooflik! Tannie se kliphuisie was Herman Walters se toevlugsoord waar hy kom skryf het? Nou kan ek nie wag om daardie dak reg te maak nie.”

Ek onthou die inligting wat Gabe pas laat deurskemer het en gryp my kans aan om meer oor hom uit te vind.

“Ek kon nie help om te sien dat jy 'n tikmasjien het nie, Gabe. Dit lyk na 'n baie vreemde besitting vir 'n boemelaar. Jy sê om te skryf is ook jou lewenswerk?” Sy glimlag verdwyn.

Tannie Batty klap haar hande opgewonde. “Is jy 'n skrywer? Hoe wonderlik! Wat skryf jy?”

Ek kan sien Gabe wil nie eintlik antwoord nie, maar toe hy met duidelike verwondering van die boek in sy hand na tannie Batty kyk, bely hy uiteindelik. “Ek is 'n joernalis. Ek doen vryskutwerk vir die *Chicago Tribune* en soms ook vir die *Saturday Evening Post*.”

“Gaan jy tans deur 'n moeilike tyd,” vra sy, “of is dit net jou vermomming?”

“Ek was besig met navorsing, tannie Batty. Ek skryf oor die boemelaarlewe en al die interessante mense wat ek so op die treine ontmoet.”

“Ek sou dit nooit kon raai nie!” sê sy. “Jy lyk soos 'n regte boemelaar met die verskriklike lang hare – en jy ruik ook soos een.”

“Dankie,” sê hy en glimlag flou. “Ek is eintlik al 'n hele ruk so aan die reis en my storie is amper klaar. Ek was op pad terug Chicago toe om my werk vir my redakteur te gaan gee toe ek hierdie ongelukkige met my been gehad het.”

“Wel, aangesien jy vir 'n rukkie hier sal moet bly,” sê tannie Batty, “kan jy netsowel jou storie tik en dit van hier af pos. Ek sal jou enige tyd help. Wat het jy nodig? Tikpapier? Dalk 'n tafeltjie om jou tikmasjien op te sit? Ons kan mos alles vir hom regsit, nè, Toots?”

“Seker maar,” sê ek. Tannie Batty laat dit so eenvoudig klink dat dit vir my én Gabe moeilik is om nee te sê.

Sy sleep dieselfde dag nog haar groot tikmasjien teen die heuwel op na my huis toe, want sy hou vol dit is baie beter as Gabe se kleintjie. Sy bring ook 'n pak tikpapier saam. Gabe werk die hele week met tye, so dikwels as wat sy koors dit toelaat. Hy word steeds baie gou moeg en hy moet kort-kort ophou werk om te slaap, maar ná 'n ruk hoor ek hom weer tik – soms in die middel van die nag.

Teen die tyd dat ek weer dorp toe ry vir my afspraak met meneer Wakefield, is Gabe se storie heeltemal klaar. Tannie Batty maak dit in 'n netjiese pakkie op en ek vat dit saam na die poskantoor in Deer Springs en pos dit Chicago toe.

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“Ons het 'n probleem, Eliza.” Die eerste woorde wat uit die prokureur se mond kom, stuur 'n rilling langs my ruggraat af. Ek het nie nog probleme nodig nie. Soos dinge tans gaan, het ek genoeg daarvan. Hoe kan God dit selfs oorweeg om my met nog te oorlaai?

“Het jy geweet dat jou skoonpa gereeld op die goederemark gespekuleer het?” vra meneer Wakefield.

“Ek weet niks van sy besigheid af nie. Is dit soos om in die effektebeurs te belê?”

“Dit is byna dieselfde, maar dit behels spekulering met plaasgoedere in plaas van korporatiewe aandele. Ongelukkig kan goederehandelaars baie meer geld verloor as hulle belê het – en dit lyk of Frank al sy spaargeld verloor het.”

“Is daar dan niks geld nie? Hoe gaan ek meneer Preston van die bank terugbetaal?”

Meneer Wakefield se hartseer gesig laat my aan 'n swarmoedige bloedhond dink. “Ek is jammer, maar daardie geld moet steeds binne negentig dae betaal word anders sal die bank se krediteure beslag lê op die eiendom. Party mense hou veilings en verkoop hulle plaastoerusting om fondse in te samel. Maar met hierdie finansiële depressie waarin ons tans is, moet ek jou waarsku dat hulle nie naastenby soveel kry as wat die toerusting werd is nie. Ek is bevrees dit geld die prys van grond ook.”

Ek is te geskok en verbaas om te huil. “So ... jy sê eintlik vir my dat ek ... buiten vir die boord en al die toerusting eintlik bankrot is?”

Meneer Wakefield maak sy oë 'n oomblik toe voordat hy weer praat. Ek wonder of hy gebid het. “Ek is bevrees dit is selfs erger as dit, Eliza. Ek weet

dit was Sam se plan dat die plaas na jou en die kinders toe sou gaan, maar jou man is voor sy pa dood; daarom kry Frank se testament voorkeur.

“Ek is jammer om dit vir jou te sê, maar Frank het alles aan sy oudste seun, Matthew Wyatt, nagelaat. Die boedel sal slegs na sy tweede seun, Samuel, en sy familie gaan indien Matthew sonder ’n erfgenaam sterf. Frank se testament verwys glad nie na jou of jou kinders nie. Dit is baie lank gelede al opgestel.”

“Wat sê jy nou eintlik?”

“Matthew Wyatt is die wettige eienaar van Wyatt-boorde, nie jy nie. Totdat Matthew afstand doen van alle aanspraak op sy erfporsie kan ons nie oordrag doen van die titelakte op iemand anders se naam nie.”

“Matthew! Maar hy is dood, of hoe?”

“Wel, ek weet nie. Sover ek weet, het Matthew iewers in 1916 of 1917 by die weermag aangesluit, maar Frank het nooit genoem dat hy dood is nie. Om die waarheid te sê, die gedenkplaat by die kerk het die name op van al die plaaslike jong mans wat hulle lewe prysgegee het, en Matthew Wyatt se naam is nie op dié lys nie. Ek het gehoop jy weet dalk waar hy ná die oorlog gaan bly het sodat ek met hom in verbinding kan tree.”

Ek skud my kop. “Nie my man óf sy pa het ooit oor hom gepraat nie. Nie ’n woord nie. Ek het altyd gedink dit is omdat hulle smart te groot is. Ek het aangeneem Matthew is dood en – ” Ek bly stil en onthou hoe ek dieselfde aanname omtrent my ma gemaak het.

“Dalk is hy dood, Eliza, maar volgens die wet moet ek ’n doodsertifikaat sien voordat ek die titelakte kan oordra op jou naam.”

“Wat moet ek nou doen?”

“Wel, ek stel voor jy gaan huis toe en kyk of jy enige familierekords in die hande kan kry. Kyk byvoorbeeld of die weermag ’n kennisgewing van sy dood gestuur het. Of dalk is daar korrespondensie met Matthew wat ’n adres op het. Intussen sal ek vir Washington skryf. Hulle rekords sal vir ons kan sê of Matthew in die oorlog dood is en of hy ontslaan is.”

“Hoe lank sal dit vat? Die bank wil die geld oor negentig dae hê.”

“Ek is jammer, maar dit kan dalk tyd neem. Ek kan ook nie voortgaan met Alvin Greer se koopaanbod nie, aangesien die eiendom nie op jou naam is nie.”

Ek is verlig om uiteindelik een stukkie goeie nuus te kry. Ek wil nie die boord aan Alvin Greer verkoop nie, selfs al sal hy ons toelaat om daar te bly.

“Die punt is, van wat ek kon agterkom nadat ek deur al Frank se dokumente gegaan het,” sê meneer Wakefield, “behoort alles aan Matthew – die huis, die grond, die trekker en al die ander toerusting ... selfs die bakkie.”

Ek het Frank Wyatt nog nooit soveel gehaat soos op hierdie oomblik nie.

Hy het nie net my kinders van hulle pa beroof nie, maar nou beroof hy hulle ook van hulle erfposisie deur alles wat regtens aan hulle behoort vir 'n ondankbare seun te gee wat jare gelede by die huis weg is.

“Wat van al daardie jare wat my man vir sy pa gewerk het?” roep ek uit. “Hy het hom afgesloof, ongeag die weer, om hom te help om daardie plek aan die gang te hou. Wat van al die harde werk wat Sam gedoen het terwyl Matthew wie weet waar was? Tel dit dan nie? My man is dóód deurdat hy vir sy pa gewerk het, en jy kom sê vir my sy kinders kry niks?”

“Ek is jammer, Eliza ... Ek verstaan hoe jy voel ... ”

“Nee, jy verstaan nié! Daardie boord is my huis, my kinders se huis.”

Ek stry teen die trane, vasbeslote om nie te huil nie, maar 'n traan loop tog oor my wang. Meneer Wakefield se oë lyk ook nat.

“Sodra ons vir Matthew Wyatt kry,” sê hy, “sal ek my bes doen om hom te oortuig dat jy en jou kinders regverdige vergoeding verdien vir al die werk wat Samuel gedoen het. Tog, as jy realisties moet wees, mevrou Wyatt, weet jy dat jy nooit Wyatt-boorde op jou eie sal kan bestuur nie. Dalk het Frank dit ook geweet.”

Die enigste ding wat Frank geweet het, is dat ek 'n buitestander is en hy het my gehaat daaroor. Dit is sy manier om Sam te straf omdat hy nie met 'n ryk vrou getrou en nog meer grond tot sy klein koninkrykie toegevoeg het nie. Ek verstaan dit. Wat ek egter nie kan verstaan nie, is hoe enige man sy eie kleinkinders kan onterf – sy eie vlees en bloed.

Toe ek by die huis kom, sit ek in die oprit in die bakkie – Matthew se bakkie – en laat my emosies bedaar voordat ek ingaan. Ek voel lus om op Frank Wyatt se graf te spoeg. Dit is so onregverdig. Ek is nou meer vasbeslote as ooit om vas te klou aan hierdie grond en hierdie huis wat regtens aan my behoort. Ek moet uitvind wat van Matthew Wyatt geword het. Soos ek nou voel, is ek kwaad genoeg om hom self te vermoor indien Matthew nog leef.

Ek begin deur Frank se studeerkamer te deursoek. Hy het noukeurig rekord gehou van elke besigheidstransaksie, elke rekening, elke kwitansie vir die afgelope twintig jaar, of so lyk dit. Daar is egter nêrens 'n klein stukkie papier met Matthew se naam op nie, wat nog te sê 'n brief of posadres.

Toe ek alles in die studeerkamer tevergeefs deursoek het, gaan haal ek 'n trapleer en klim tot in die solder. Terwyl ek na al die ou meubels, stowwerige bokse en ou reiskiste kyk, kan ek nie anders as om terug te dink aan wat tannie Batty by Frank se begrafnis gesê het nie: *“Daar is 'n groot vrag smart in hierdie huis se solder.”* Sy weet nie helfte daarvan nie.

Ek grawe deur 'n berg goed op soek na ou fotoalbums, briewe of enige ander memorabilia wat ek kan kry wat dalk na Matthew verwys. Dit is

heeltemal te koud om te lank in die solder te bly; daarom dra ek enige boks wat belowend lyk af en sit dit in die voorkamer.

“Wel, kyk net hierna,” sê tannie Batty en haal ’n ou kralehandsak uit een van die bokse uit. “Dit was my suster, Lydia, s’n. O, ek sien haar nog met hierdie handsak oor die een arm en ’n kêrel aan die ander. Sy was vreeslik lief vir dans.”

“Sal tannie Batty asseblief saam met my deur hierdie foto’s kyk?” vra ek toe ek op ’n familie-fotoalbum afkom. “Tannie kan dalk vir my sê wie al hierdie mense is.” Party van die foto’s het onderskrifte, geskryf met wit ink op die swart bladsye, maar by die meeste staan daar niks nie. Ek besef ek het nie net nog nooit vir Matthew Wyatt ontmoet nie, ek het ook nog nooit ’n foto van hom gesien nie.

“Wag, laat ek net gou my bril gaan haal.” Sy gaan haal die bril en kom sit dan langs my op die bank met Becky op haar skoot. Die drie van ons blaai saam deur die album. “Baie van hierdie mense is Frank Wyatt se familie,” sê tannie Batty terwyl ons na die eerste paar bladsye kyk.

“Ek het eers nou die dag uitgevind hy het familie hier in Deer Springs,” sê ek. “Mevrou Greer het my verbaas toe sy gesê het sy is Frank se niggie.”

“O, daar is nog ’n paar van hulle in die omtrek. Ken jy vir Julia Foster, die sheriff se vrou? Sy is nog ’n Wyatt-niggie.”

“Is hier ’n foto van Lydia?” vra ek en blaai vooruit in die album. My skoonma is nog ’n geheimenis wat ek nie verstaan nie. Sam en sy pa sou toeslaan die oomblik wanneer ek oor haar probeer uitvra het. Aan die ander kant wou ek ook geen vrae oor my verlede antwoord nie; daarom het ek geleer om nie slapende honde wakker te maak nie.

“Kom ek kyk ... Hier, dis my suster, Lydia.”

“O, sy is beeldskoon.” Die vrou na wie tannie Batty wys, is glad nie die stewige, hardwerkende plaasvrou wat ek verwag het om te sien nie. Lydia is so pragtig dat sy my asem wegslaan. Ek staar vir die heel eerste keer na my skoonma se gesig en ek kan nie wegkyk nie. Sy het ’n delikate soort skoonheid gehad wat tegelyk onskuldig en verleidelik is.

“Jy sou nooit kon raai ons is susters nie, nè?” sê tannie Batty en lag by haarself.

Ek kyk na tannie Batty en sien nie juis enige ooreenkomste nie, behalwe vir die susters se geboë wenkbroue en delikate wangbene. Ek kyk na Lydia se donker oë en grasieuse wenkbroue, haar onweerstaanbare glimlag, en soek na die ooreenkomste tussen my man en sy ma. Ek kan niks kry nie.

Sam was sterk gebou met sy pa se vierkantige kakebeen, ligte hare en blou oë. Tog lyk iets omtrent sy ma vir my bekend, asof ek haar voorheen al gesien



het, selfs al weet ek dit is nie so nie.

Ek sien vir Lydia op verskeie foto's op die volgende paar bladsye, gewoonlik omring deur haar drie seuns op verskillende ouderdomme. Dit is vir my moeilik om na foto's van Sam te kyk waar hy jonk en sterk en gesond is. Dit is verstommend hoe baie my Jimmy na hom lyk. In omtrent al die foto's staan Sam so naby soos 'n skaduwee aan sy ouer broer, Matthew – net soos Luke altyd vir Jimmy volg.

Ek staar en staar na elke foto van Matthew Wyatt. Hy het sy ma se donker hare en oë en lyk so verskillend van Sam soos twee broers maar kan. Die jongste broer, Willie, lyk egter ook heeltemal anders. Ek weet verseker Willie is dood. Ek het sy graf in die familiebegraafplaas langs Lydia en Frank s'n gesien – langs my Sam s'n. Volgens die datums op Willie se grafsteen is hy dood toe hy nege was. Dit is hoe oud Jimmy nou is. Tannie Batty wys na sy foto.

“Hierdie is seker een van die laaste foto's wat hulle ooit van klein Willie geneem het,” sê sy hartseer.

“Hoe is hy dood?” vra ek. “Ek het vergeet wat Sam my vertel het.”

“Arme kind. Hy het een winter deur die ys op die dam geval en verdrink.”

Ek voel hoe my vel kriewel by dié vreemde toevalligheid, asof ek self pas in daardie ysige water geval het. Dit is presies hoe die jongste broer in Gabe Harper se storie dood is.

“Waar was Tannie toe dit gebeur het?” vra ek.

Sy skuif ongemaklik op die bank rond. “Wel, die dam is reg agter my huis, jy weet. Ek hoor nogal baie van wat daar aan die gebeur is.”

“Het Tannie gehoor wat op die dag van Willie se dood gebeur het?”

Tannie Batty skuif sagkens vir Becky van haar skoot af en gee vir haar die kralehandsak sodat sy by ons voete daarmee kan sit en speel. Dan haal sy 'n geblomde sakdoek uit haar geel trui se mou en begin dit tussen haar vingers brei.

“Die drie seuns het teen die heuwel agter my huis met hulle sleë gery, net soos jou drie kinders maak. Ek het hulle hoor gil en skree, en toe word dit skielik stil. Ek het gedink hulle is dalk huis toe. Toe ek by my venster uitkyk, het ek egter vir Matthew en Willie naby die dam sien staan. Die seuns het daarvan gehou om daarop te skaats sodra die ys hard genoeg was. Ek was bang dat hulle dit daardie dag sou probeer en ek het geweet dit is nog te vroeg in Desember vir die ys om veilig te wees.”

Ek voel nog 'n rilling terwyl sy die detail van Gabe se storie herhaal.

“Ek het by die deur gaan staan en na hulle probeer roep,” gaan tannie Batty voort, “maar hulle het my nie gehoor nie. Ek het toe my jas en stewels gaan

haal ... Ek was nog altyd spyt dat ek so lank gevat het om warm aan te trek. Teen die tyd toe ek buite kom, was Matthew histeries en hy het geskree dat Willie deur die ys geval het. Hy het gehuil: 'Red hom! Red hom!' Ek moes met alles in my keer dat daardie seun agter hom aan in die water spring. Ons het so gou moontlik hulp gekry, maar dit was te laat." Ek hoor die trane in tannie Batty se bewerige stem. "Daardie arme kind ... en arme, arme Lydia."

Ek is jammer omdat ek sulke pynlike herinneringe by haar opgeroep het, maar ek moet nog iets weet. "Was Willie dalk Frank Wyatt se gunsteling?" vra ek.

"Dit was eintlik skandelik hoe hy daardie seun voorgetrek en die ander twee mishandel het. Hulle was vreeslik jaloers op hom en ek kon hulle nie blameer nie. Arme Matthew het so verantwoordelik gevoel vir wat met klein Willie gebeur het dat hy aanhou sê het dit is sy skuld. Ek het vir hom gesê hy moet ophou daarmee. Moet dit nooit voor jou pa sê nie!"

"Was dit waar? Was die ongeluk Matthew se skuld?"

"Die waarheid is dat Frank Wyatt vir Willie doodgemaak het deur hom voor te trek."

*Net een ander persoon weet en ek dink nie sy sal ooit vertel nie*, het Gabe geskryf. My hart begin galop soos 'n resiesperd. Sê nou, onder al daardie lang hare en baard ... Sê nou Gabe Harper is eintlik Matthew Wyatt?

Ek onthou hoe hy daardie eerste aand in my kombuis gestaan en my so duidelik aan Sam herinner het. Hy het selfs sy kop laat sak en gebed voor hy eet soos Sam altyd gemaak het. Hy het ook geweet presies watter werk buite in die skuur gedoen moes word. Hy het ook skuldig gelyk toe ek hom gevra het hoe hy geweet het my van is Wyatt. Ek voel nog 'n rilling.

Ek blaai stadig deur die fotoalbum en staar in elke foto na Matthew Wyatt se gesig, op soek na 'n ooreenkoms met die bebaarde en langhaarman in my slaapkamer. Het tannie Batty nie gesê Gabe lyk bekend die eerste keer toe sy hom gesien het nie? Vir 'n vreemdeling het hy haar boonop te maklik tannie Batty genoem.

Dit is dalk hoekom Gabe weier om dokter toe te gaan. Hy het dalk 'n litteken of geboortemerk of iets wat 'n familiedokter sal herken, miskien selfs die litteken op sy bors. Dit is dalk hoekom Gabe so vies was vir my toe ek vir hom gesê het dat ek in sy sak gekyk het. Hy wil nie hê ek moet die waarheid ontdek nie.

Maar hoekom dan so geheimsinnig, veral nou dat sy pa en sy broer dood is? Waarom kom hy nie net uit met die waarheid en sê wie hy is nie? Ek kan hom nie sommer net vra sonder om te erken dat ek sy privaat joernale gelees het nie. Ek het in elk geval ook geen idee hoe hy sal reageer wanneer hy uitvind

dat die huis en die boord nou aan hom behoort nie. Sal hy dit alles van ons af wegneem? Ons in die sneeu uitskop? Vir al wat ek weet, het Gabe – of Matthew, of wat sy naam ook al is – iewers ’n vrou en ’n gesin van sy eie wat nie kan wag om in te trek nie.

“Tannie Batty, wat het van Matthew geword?” vra ek uiteindelik.

“Matthew?” Sy kyk in die vertrek rond met ’n bekommerde uitdrukking op haar gesig asof hy ’n oomblik tevore hier was en sy hom verloor het. Dan help sy haarself reg. “Nee, daardie jong seun se naam is Jimmy,” sê sy hardop. “Matthew het by die weermag aangesluit en is Frankryk toe om in die oorlog te gaan veg.”

Die oorlog. Daar is ’n waterbottel van die VSA-weermag in Gabe se goingsak.

’n Deel van my wil hê Gabe moet Matthew wees sodat hy die verband kan betaal en my kan help om die plaas te bestuur, maar ’n ander deel van my is bang dat ek en die kinders ons ware tuiste sal verloor – en ek kan nooit toelaat dat dit gebeur nie.

“Die oorlog is al langer as tien jaar verby, tannie Batty. Wat het daarna met Matthew gebeur? Het Tannie enige idee? Het hy ooit weer huis toe gekom?”

Tannie Batty trek haar oë op skrefies soos sy konsentreer. “Matthew was nog in Frankryk toe sy ma dood is. Ek het vir hom geskryf om hom te laat weet dat sy oorlede is. Lydia het vir my sy adres gegee en gevra ek moet vir hom skryf voordat ... voordat sy ons verlaat ... ” Dit lyk of tannie Batty nog iets wil sê. Ek wag.

“Matthew het net die een keer vir my teruggeskryf,” gaan sy voort. “Hy het my bedank omdat ek die nuus met hom gedeel het en my gevra om asseblief na Sam te kyk. Dis al ... Net daardie een kort brief. Ek dink nie enigiemand het sedertdien van hom gehoor nie.”

“Het Tannie nog daardie brief? Kan ek dit sien?” Ek weet reeds hoe Gabe se handskrif lyk. Ek kan die twee maklik vergelyk.

“Ek kan nie onthou of ek daardie brief gebêre het of nie. Ek kan seker daarna soek. Is dit belangrik?”

“Ja, dit is baie belangrik.” Ek weet egter ek vra die onmoontlike met inagneming van die toestand waarin tannie Batty se huis is. “As Matthew in Frankryk dood is,” vra ek haar, “sou Frank Wyatt Tannie vertel het?”

“Nooit! Frank het nie ’n enkele woord met my gepraat van daardie nag af toe hy my pa se huis afgebrand het nie.”

“Hy het Tannie se pa se huis afgebrand?”

“Ja, hy het. Hy wou perskebome op daardie stuk grond plant en my huis was in sy pad. O, hy het sy bes gedoen om almal te oortuig dit was ’n

ongeluk, maar ek weet van beter. Ek sê vir jou, Toots, so seker as wat appels aan bome groei, het Frank Wyatt daardie brand begin. Ek moes sedertdien in die kothuis bly.”

Sy beskryf nou ’n deel van die familie se geskiedenis waarvan ek niks weet nie, en ek is ook nie seker of ek dit wil hoor nie. Ek was van die eerste dag dat ek hom ontmoet het, bang vir my skoonpa. Later het ek geleer om hom te haat omdat hy toegelaat het dat Sam sterf. Hy het nog altyd gesê tannie Batty is mal. Nou wonder ek wie ek moet glo.

“Noudat ek daaraan dink,” sê sy, “dit sal my nie verbaas om uit te vind dat Frank Wyatt boonop verantwoordelik is vir my kombuisdak wat ingeval het nie.”

“Hy is dan in November dood. Hoe kon hy – ”

“O, jy ken hom nie soos ek hom geken het nie, Toots. Hy kon al lankal deur die dakbalke gesaag het en net gewag het vir die sneeu om te kom.”

Ek sug moeg. Ek het nou meer vrae as voordat ek na antwoorde begin soek het. Hoe gaan ek ooit hierdie gemors ontrafel? Ek blaai na die laaste bladsy in die album en kry die heel laaste foto van Matthew. Hy lyk omtrent agtien jaar oud en staan langs sy broer Sam. Agter hulle is die nuut geverfde woorde teen die kant van die skuur: *Wyatt-boorde – Frank Wyatt & Seuns, Eienaars*. Ek haal die foto versigtig uit en gee dit vir tannie Batty.

“Ek moet vir Matthew kry, tannie Batty. Het Tannie enige idee wat van hom geword het?”

Tannie Batty antwoord my nie. Haar gedagtes het weggedwaal na ’n ander plek en ’n ander tyd. In die stilte hoor ek ’n goederetrein wat verby die boord rammel. Die fluit se hartseer geluid herinner my, soos altyd, aan al die jare dat ek na ’n tuiste gesmag het. Ek het die land deurkruis op treine, na die ligte gestaar wat in huise se vensters geskyn het en gedroom van ’n familie en ’n huis soos dié. Ek het tien jaar gelede besluit om Wyatt-boorde toe te kom en dit my eie te maak, maar ek het nie geweet watter geheime en hartseer hier skuil nie, onvoorbereid op alles waarop ek gereken het.

Teen hierdie tyd het ek drie kinders om aan te dink; kinders vir wie ek my lewe sal gee. Ek moet ’n manier kry om vir hulle te sorg, om die huis te hou wat aan hulle behoort. Ek moet bewys dat Matthew Wyatt dood is.

“Asseblief, tannie Batty. As Tannie éniets oor Matthew weet, moet Tannie my asseblief vertel.”

Sy frons. “As jy wil verstaan wat met Matthew gebeur het, moet jy eers my suster, Lydia, verstaan.”

“Vertel my enigiets wat Tannie dink sal help. Ek wil nie hierdie plaas en die boord verloor nie. Ek wil dit vir my kinders hê. Dit is hulle tuiste – my

tuiste.”

Sy kyk skerp na my en ’n kwaai blik flits skielik oor haar gesig. “Is jy seker jy wil hierdie boord vir daardie jong kinders hou? Dit kom teen ’n baie hoë prys.”

“Ek weet. Die man van die bank wil vyfhonderd dollar hê, en as ek hom nie binne negentig dae betaal nie, sal ons alles verloor.”

Sy kyk weg. “Nee, dit kos baie meer as dit. Dit het reeds die lewe gekos van die mense vir wie ek lief was ... ”

# Lydia 's Story

*Deer Springs, 1894*

“We need to be angels for each other, to give each other strength and consolation. Because only when we fully realize that the cup of life is not only a cup of sorrow but also a cup of joy will we be able to drink it.”

HENRI NOUWEN

## CHAPTER SIX

**M**y sister, Lydia, was the most beautiful girl in Deer Springs—and I was the homeliest. Lydia could spend hours gazing at herself in the mirror, but I always turned my head away whenever I passed one because I hated what I saw. My face was as round and as plain as a baking powder biscuit, with a nose like a Roman emperor's stuck right in the middle of it. And my body—well, my body certainly should have matured by the time I'd celebrated my twentieth birthday, but I was still as plump and flat-chested as a schoolgirl. My mother nagged me constantly about the way I slouched, warning that I'd surely cripple my spine if I didn't stand up straight. But the taunts of my schoolmates and the nickname "Betty Butterball" rang louder in my ears than any of my mother's warnings. I was short and fat and that was that.

My shoulder-length hair wasn't chestnut like Lydia's, or auburn or mahogany or some other glamorous color like the heroines of all my favorite novels. It was plain old brown, like mouse fur. Its unruly waves frizzed around my face like a bush, refusing to stay neatly piled on my head. My eyes, under thick, heavy brows, weren't dark and mysterious like Lydia's eyes, which had the rich luster of bronze velvet. They weren't even an interesting color like hazel or caramel or sandalwood. They were just plain old brown, the color of dirt. No wonder the only things I knew about love and romance had come from books. No wonder I'd never had a single boyfriend until Frank Wyatt courted me.

Lydia was the one who attracted boyfriends like bees to apple

blossoms. Lydia was seventeen months younger than me, and from the time she turned fourteen, her voluptuous figure had more curves than a country lane. If she hadn't been my best friend, I would have hated her for certain. But the two of us were as close as two sisters could be, forced to turn to each other for affection and consolation by our grim, practical-minded parents. They staunchly refused to pet and cuddle us for fear we would grow up pampered and spoiled.

"Children need discipline and order in their lives," my mother believed, "not a bunch of foolish molly-coddling." Her typical answer to all our wounds and heartaches was "Quit your bellyaching."

My father had married my mother, a spinster school mistress, when she was thirty-five and he was forty-two. He'd lost his first wife and two sons to a cholera epidemic and had hoped to produce another son to inherit his land. Instead, he'd been sorely disappointed to find himself stuck with two daughters. And after Lydia's difficult arrival as a breech baby, my mother promptly moved him out of her bedroom, making it very clear that he would father no more children by her.

With tenderness and sympathy so hard to come by in our household, Lydia and I learned to rely on each other. "I'll be your guardian angel, Betsy," she promised, "and you can be mine." We made a solemn vow to watch out for one another when I was eight and a half and she was seven, and we formalized it with a "pinkie promise." We never let each other down.

That's why I turned to Lydia in utter misery after I'd completed the eighth grade of grammar school and my father informed me what the future course of my life would be. He had called me away from my novel and my rocking chair on the front porch one soft summer day and ordered me into our front parlor. It was a bleak, colorless room with worn rugs on the floor and dreary pictures on the bare plaster walls, a room that felt chilly even in the summertime. We lived in an era of ornate Victorian frills—fringed horsehair sofas in silk tapestry



and damask, glassfronted curio cabinets stuffed with ornaments and gewgaws, flocked wallpaper, crocheted doilies and antimacassars—but our farmhouse was as plain and as cold as my cheerless parents. We didn't own a Gramophone or a stereopticon or a magic lantern—not even a piano or a cottage organ. The sound of the mantel clock ticking out the passing of time accompanied our evenings as we sat on the plain, mismatched furniture that other people had discarded. That's where Father ordered me to sit on that warm afternoon, and coming from him, his plans for my future had the tone of a death knell.

"I have decided that you will continue your education next fall," he announced. "You will be a schoolteacher, like your mother."

"But I don't want to be a teacher!" I cried. In my fertile but naive imagination, I had daydreamed of moving to New York City to become a newspaper reporter like my idol, Nellie Bly. My horror at the thought of being trapped in a desolate one-room schoolhouse all day with two dozen mulish farm children made me outspoken for the first time in my life.

"Please, Father, don't make me be a schoolteacher. I want to be a newspaper reporter and write for the *New York World* like Nellie Bly."

"Out of the question. That is not a suitable career for a young woman, nor is New York City a suitable place to live. You will be a teacher."

The discussion was over. It was useless to try to argue with him. I would've had better luck trying to fly. He was my father and I had to obey him. Fathers were gods in their own households, determining when their family rose and when we slept, who we saw and who we didn't see, how we thought, how we behaved, how we felt. I could no more decide the course of my life or my future than the cows could decide when they would be milked. To defy my father was unthinkable. I poured out my sorrow and disappointment on Lydia's shoulder later that night.

“Don’t cry, Betsy. Going to teachers’ school is an honor,” she tried to assure me. “Didn’t you tell me that Nellie Bly once studied to be a teacher, too?”

“Well...yes, until her father died and she ran out of money.”

“See? You can still become a newspaper reporter, just like she did.”

“So it isn’t ho...hopeless?” I asked, hiccuping through my tears. I took the handkerchief Lydia offered me and honked my beak of a nose.

We were in our attic bedroom where we shared all our secrets and a double bed, along with an ancient three-drawer dresser and an unfinished closet with mice. We’d moved the bed to the middle of the wall, squeezed between the two dormer windows so we could gaze up at the sky and the stars at night, even though the single-glazed windows were so drafty in the wintertime that frost sometimes formed on the inside of the glass. We had long since learned to sit up carefully in the morning so we wouldn’t bump our heads on the slanting ceiling. As cold as it was in winter, the room was stifling in the summer with the sun beating down on the tin roof right above our heads all day. On that hot summer night, as we hugged each other in our cotton nightgowns, our sweaty arms stuck together as if we’d been glued to each other with white paste.

“It’s not hopeless at all!” Lydia said. “Father knows you’ve inherited all the brains in this family so he’s making sure you get a good education. Look at me—I’m so dim-witted I’ll probably never even make it to the eighth grade. All I’ll ever be good for is a wife and a mother. At least being a teacher is glamorous.”

“Ha! Then why are the women teachers always old spinsters?”

“You won’t be a spinster, Betsy,” she said smoothing back my unruly hair. “You’ll find a very special man who—”

“I don’t want a man! I want to be a newspaper reporter and be daring and brave like Nellie Bly. I want to expose injustice and

corruption and change the world like she does.”

Nellie Bly was twenty-three and I was fourteen when she pretended to be insane in order to write about life in a notorious women’s asylum. Her daring won her a job with *The New York World* and launched her adventurous career as a stunt reporter. I loved reading about all her exploits—posing as an unwed mother to expose the baby-buying trade, pretending to be a thief in order to see inside a New York City jail, and so on. In an age when most women were mere adornments on their husbands’ arms, Nellie was an independent woman who dared to enter a man’s world and prove she was just as good as they were—maybe even better.

But my dream of becoming a stunt reporter would have to wait. I attended school that fall and studied to be a teacher, as my father had decreed. During my second year there, Nellie Bly had the greatest adventure of her life: She traveled around the world, all alone, in an attempt to beat the hero’s record in Jules Verne’s novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. For two-and-a-half months the whole world followed her progress religiously as she made her way over land and sea, returning to New York in only seventy-two days, six hours, eleven minutes, and fourteen seconds. She was the most famous woman in the world and I wanted to be just like her.

My favorite teacher, Mr. Herman, knew how much I loved reading about Nellie and always gave me his *New York World* as soon as he was finished with it. I made a scrapbook of all her exploits and filled notebook after notebook with imaginary exploits of my own. When I wasn’t writing I was reading, devouring books as fast as Mr. Herman loaned them to me.

“You’re my best student, Betty,” he told me one day after I’d finished reading *Sense and Sensibility*, “but I’m worried about how you will fare as a teacher. To be honest, you’re so tiny and softspoken that I’m afraid the students will mistake you for one of themselves.”

It was his polite way of saying that I was absurdly short and painfully shy—and the rough-and-tumble farmers' children were going to mop the floor with me.

"I really don't want to be a teacher, Mr. Herman," I confessed. "It was my father's idea. What I really want to be is a stunt reporter like Nellie Bly."

He thought for a moment before he replied. "That could be a difficult career, too, for someone as...as reserved as you are." He might have added "innocent" or "naïve" or "scared of my own shadow." While I loved reading about Nellie Bly's exploits, the truth was that I would have fainted dead away if adventure had tapped me on the shoulder.

Mr. Herman must have seen my quivering chin and brimming eyes because he quickly added, "Don't get me wrong. You're a very gifted writer, Betty. I enjoy reading everything you write. Your work is head and shoulders above your classmates' work. I'm just not sure that being an investigative reporter is right for you, either."

"Sometimes I write poems," I blurted.

He smiled gently. "Yes, I do see you more as an Elizabeth Barrett Browning than a Nellie Bly."

"Would you like to read some of them?"

"I would be honored."

But I never had a chance to show my poems to him or to finish my studies or to become a teacher—let alone a stunt reporter. Mother took sick the year I turned eighteen, and Father made me quit school to take care of her and run his household. Lydia had a good job by then, working at the Deer Springs Dry Goods store, and Father didn't want to give up the paycheck she brought home to him every week.

I don't think Lydia actually did much work at the store. The owner simply parked her behind the counter and told her to smile, and the competing store across town just about went out of business. Every

salesman and farmer's son who walked through the door instantly fell in love with her and would start buying whatever she was selling. Give Lydia two dozen umbrellas on a sunny day and they'd be sold out by noon. She was the store's most valuable asset, and they knew it.

I didn't mind staying home to care for Mother. She liked me to read aloud to her when she was awake and I had time for my own writing projects while she slept—after the cooking and the housework and the laundry were done, of course.

Sometimes I got lonely, but Lydia kept me amused each night with hilarious tales of all the latest gossip in Deer Springs. She could describe selling a yard of cloth to crabby old Myrtle Barstow and have me holding my sides with laughter. Then she would ask, "Did you write any poems today, Betsy? You have to read me one of your poems." Lydia always encouraged me in my writing career.

Most of my poetry described my very limited world—the orchard as it changed with the seasons, the bluebirds and chipmunks feeding on the seeds I scattered for them, the doe and her two fawns drinking from our pond in the evening. But one day Lydia copied two of my poems in her beautiful handwriting and convinced me to mail them to a magazine.

"I swear, if you don't send them, I will!" she said, stomping her foot for emphasis. Lydia worked in the real world every day and had learned to pepper her conversation with scandalous phrases like "I swear" and "holy smokes."

When I finally gave in, she helped me compose a cover letter that sounded as confident and poised as Lydia always did, not meek and apologetic, which was my typical manner. We linked our pinkies for good luck and sent my poems off. Much to my surprise, *Garden Magazine* published one of them and asked me to send more. Lydia and I danced and cried and hugged each other in joy. My payment was only two free copies of the magazine, but I didn't care. It thrilled

me just to see my name—my poems!—in print for the first time.

The next day Lydia brought home the weekly *Deer Springs News*. She had smiled at the newsboy and he'd given it to her for free.

"Here, this is for you," she told me. "You *must* write something for the newspaper." I handed it right back to her.

"I can't write anything for the *News*! How can I be an investigative reporter when I'm stuck way out here in a farmhouse all day? I can see the headlines now: 'Scandal Exposed in Fowler's Chicken Coop' or maybe 'Big Brouhaha in Betty's Barn.' "

"Write a letter to the editor, Betsy. Didn't you tell me that's how Nellie Bly got her start?"

Lydia was right. According to the story, Nellie had read a column in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* stating that women were totally use-less for anything outside of marriage. Outraged, Nellie wrote a scathing reply that so amused the *Dispatch's* editor that he offered her a job.

"There isn't anything in the *Deer Springs News* that's worthy of an outraged response," I sighed after reading it from front to back. "And even if there was, the editor doesn't seem to have much of a sense of humor. I doubt that he would be amused by me."

Against my feeble protests, Lydia chose a short piece I'd written about springtime in an apple orchard and sent it to the editor. We were both thrilled when the newspaper paid me \$1.75 for it— my very first paycheck. With our pinkie fingers raised in celebration, I treated Lydia to an ice-cream sundae at the soda fountain in town. Lydia's smile mesmerized the young man behind the counter and he gave us both double scoops for the price of a single.

Mother never recovered from her illness. After lying bedridden for almost two years, she died the year I turned twenty. By then my father's health had also started to decline, and at the age of sixty-three, he found it harder and harder to keep up with the farm work. Faced with his own mortality, he recognized his duty to secure a

future for Lydia and me. He came up with a plan that most dime novels would call “nefarious.”

I was halfheartedly kneading bread dough in the kitchen with *A Tale of Two Cities* propped against the flour canister one morning in May when Frank Wyatt arrived to see my father. I knew very little about Frank except that he was a deacon at our church, a bachelor, and about eight or nine years older than me. His forefathers had been the community’s earliest settlers, farming the land that bordered our acreage on the north side. Frank had inherited his father’s entire estate and was slowly buying up all the property he could get his hands on, building Wyatt Orchards into a kingdom with himself as the king.

“Betty, get in here!” my father suddenly called from the parlor. He had a voice that made you drop everything and run, whether you had flour on your hands or not. Frank Wyatt rose from his chair like a gentleman when I entered the room, even though he wore overalls.

“Good morning, Miss Fowler,” he said, bowing slightly. Frank was very attractive in a rugged, austere sort of way, with a cleft in his granite chin, hair like pale winter sunshine, and eyes the color of a glacial stream. His movements were stiff, as if he was ill-at-ease in his own broad-shouldered body, and whether sitting or standing, Frank always looked as though he was posing for a photograph. The expression on his stern, unsmiling face when he passed me the collection plate on Sunday always made me feel so miserly I wanted to dump the entire contents of my purse into the basket. But Frank Wyatt had such a spotless reputation in the church and in the community that God might have chiseled him out of the same hunk of stone as the Ten Commandments.

“Bring us some coffee,” my father ordered.

“Please don’t trouble yourself, Mr. Fowler,” Frank said, spreading his massive hands. “I can’t stay long. I just dropped by to see how you

were doing. The pastor announced in church last Sunday that you were ill again—”

“Not that it’s any of *his* business,” Father said with a grunt.

“And so I wondered if you could use some help. I have a crew coming to my place later this week and—”

“You don’t fool me with your cool manners,” Father said, interrupting him. “You’ve been hovering around here ever since you heard I took sick last winter. You’re still looking to get your hands on my property, aren’t you?” My father’s response to Mr. Wyatt’s kind offer was so rude that I turned to escape into the kitchen. “Betty, get back in here and sit down,” Father shouted. “I want you to hear what I have to say, too.”

I did as Father commanded. I sat, staring at Frank Wyatt’s scuffed work boots, my cheeks burning.

“It’s my pond you’re after, right?” Father asked him.

“Your pond is the envy of every farmer around here, Mr. Fowler, and—” “Last winter you offered to buy my land if I ever wanted to sell it, remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Still interested?”

I glanced up at Frank. He was practically salivating with anticipation. He battled to hide his excitement behind a calm facade. “I feel it’s my Christian duty to help others in their time of need. That’s the only reason I’m here, sir. Nevertheless, my offer still stands should you decide to sell.”

“As a matter of fact I *don’t* want to sell. I didn’t work hard all these years to build this place up just so I could sell it off to strangers someday. I worked so that my children and grandchildren would have something to inherit when I’m gone. Now, I’ve put a lot of labor into my land. Unfortunately, the Almighty only saw fit to give me daughters. So here’s my decision. I’m deeding everything to my



daughter Betty here, for a wedding gift. If you want my land, you'll have to marry her."

I don't know which was greater—my absolute horror or my utter humiliation. How could Father offer his own daughter as part of a package deal, as if I were a prize-winning farm animal or a new plow? How unfair to force Mr. Wyatt to decide if he wanted our land badly enough to marry me as part of the bargain. I knew how Leah, the ugly older sister in the Bible, must have felt listening to scheming Jacob and cheating Laban haggle over her. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to burst into tears or to run from the room.

But if my father's blunt offer repulsed Frank, he never showed it. "You're much too generous, Mr. Fowler," he said smoothly. "Any man in Deer Springs would be honored to marry a fine Christian woman like your daughter, even if she had no land at all."

I felt a rush of gratitude toward him for taking some of the sting out of my father's words, even if it was pure poppycock. Every man in Deer Springs longed to marry Lydia, not me.

My father stood, a signal that the bargaining had ended. "Now you know the way it is, Wyatt," he said with a frown. "If you're interested, you can begin with a proper courtship. You have permission to call on my daughter."

"Thank you," Frank said, rising as well. He hesitated a moment, as if mulling something over in his mind. "I believe there is an ice-cream social at church next Saturday afternoon. I would be pleased if you would accompany me, Miss Fowler." I managed to nod but couldn't bring myself to look at him. "Good. I'll stop by for you around two o'clock."

He said good-bye then, leaving me alone with my father. I felt desolate, bereaved. I couldn't seem to move from my chair. "Mr. Wyatt doesn't want to marry me," I whimpered.

"Nonsense. He wants our land. He's a hard-working man. He'll

make a good son-in-law.” Father had analyzed the situation in terms of himself. He’d never questioned what my wishes or dreams might be. I felt trapped.

“But...but what if I don’t want to marry him?”

“You’ll do as you’re told,” my father said. “I know what’s best for you—understand?” The tears I had struggled to hold back began rolling down my cheeks. Father didn’t seem to notice my misery as he savored his triumph. “Young Wyatt has always coveted my property, but what he doesn’t realize is that I’ve coveted Wyatt Orchards just as much. He thinks he’s getting my land, but he’s forgetting that I’m also getting his. My grandson will own Wyatt Orchards someday. I’ll insist that he renames it Wyatt &Fowler Orchards.”

“I’m sure Mr. Wyatt would much rather marry Lydia than me,” I said, wiping my eyes. “Maybe you should give him a choice, Father.”

“Lydia!” he said in surprise. “She won’t have any trouble finding a husband or getting on in life. This way I’ll make sure that you’re married off, too—and married well.”

I felt torn between wanting to please my father to finally win his love and approval after all these years and with longing to run away from this terrifying arrangement and applying for a job as a reporter in some big city. In spite of my limited writing success, I had no self-confidence at all. I was terrified of the unknown—of marriage as well as of life alone in a strange city. I poured out all my woe to Lydia in our bedroom that night.

“Jeepers creepers, Betsy, that’s wonderful news!” she exclaimed. “Frank Wyatt is a real good-looker.”

“Sure—if you like courting a fence post.” I marched stiffly across the narrow room in pantomime.

“Maybe he is a bit prim,” she said, laughing. “But holy smokes, he’s rich! He’s one of Deer Springs’ most eligible bachelors.” “I don’t know how I can even face him under these circumstances,” I moaned,

flopping backward onto the bed. “Father is practically forcing him to marry me.”

“Horse feathers! Mr. Wyatt won’t do anything he doesn’t want to do, even for land. Besides, if there’s going to be a stampede of men trying to marry you to inherit this farm, it’s better that Mr. Wyatt gets there first than a lot of other drips I could name.”

I covered my face. “He’s taking me to the ice-cream social this Saturday, and I don’t know what on earth to say to him all afternoon.”

“You want to know what I think? I think Mr. Wyatt is just as shy as you are. Why else would he remain a bachelor all this time?” Lydia tugged my hands away, pulling on them until I sat up. “Come on, I’ll teach you a few tricks that drive men crazy.”

When it came to men, Lydia was an expert. She secretly led a wild life, breaking a different boy’s heart every week. I helped her concoct elaborate excuses, saying she was visiting shut-ins or working late at the store doing inventory, and poor Father believed us. I would hear the fascinating details of her escapades when she returned home at night—a party at the forbidden dance hall, a moonlit bonfire at the lake, a secret rendezvous with a traveling salesman—and I wrote down each installment as if it were the latest chapter in a romance novel.

“First of all,” she began, “when Mr. Wyatt helps you up into his carriage, let your hand linger in his a moment, pressing ever so slightly—like this.”

“You mean I have to take his hand? He’s such a statue I’m afraid his touch will turn me into stone, too!”

“More likely gold. I swear, everything he touches turns to gold, Betsy, not stone. And make sure you sit close enough for your thigh to accidentally brush against his—like so.”

I shuddered involuntarily. “Oh, Lydia, I couldn’t! The very idea makes my skin crawl.”

“Don’t be a pantywaist. Now listen, if he says something funny, even if it really isn’t, laugh like this—” she demonstrated with a happy, tinkling chuckle—“and touch his arm or his chest ever so briefly, like this, while you do.”

“I can’t imagine Frank Wyatt cracking jokes.”

“You’re right,” Lydia said with a frown, “me either. Okay then, tell him how wonderful he is. Flatter him. Men love flattery.”

“Ugh! I’d probably throw up.”

“Make something up. This is your chance to write fiction, Betsy. Give it a try. And don’t back away if he tries to kiss you, either.”

“His lips are so thin and tight his kiss would probably bounce right off.”

“You’re so funny,” she said, hugging me tightly. “Just be your wonderful, witty self and I swear he’ll fall head over heels in love with you!”

I wasn’t so sure.

On the afternoon of the ice-cream social, Lydia fixed my hair and let me borrow her best silk shirtwaist with the leg-of-mutton sleeves to wear with my Sunday skirt. She had brought a brand new, long-waist, five-hook, bust-perfecto corset home from the dry goods store and crammed me into it, yanking on the laces until the rolls of fat around my middle had no place to go but up, lifting my tiny bosom along with them. I stared in disbelief at my reflection in the mirror. For the first time in my life my waist looked tiny and my bust looked full.

“There! You’re gorgeous!” my sister cried.

“Lydia, I can’t breathe!” I gasped.

“Then don’t.”

“But what if I faint? I’m feeling light-headed already and I haven’t even tried to walk.”

“Good. You’re allowed to swoon. That’s what smelling salts are for. Mr. Wyatt will think it’s your dainty, feminine constitution and it will

make him feel manly to catch you in his arms.”

“Ha! He’s more likely to let me drop to the floor like a log.”

Lydia put on all the finishing touches—a dab of rouge on my chubby cheeks, her own beaded comb in my hair, Mother’s cameo brooch at my throat. I felt like a schoolgirl playing dress-up. Then I heard the plod of horses in the lane below our windows. Frank Wyatt had arrived, right on time.

“Get the wash basin, Lydia! I’m going to throw up!”

“No, you’re not. Don’t be a ninny.” She smiled, tucking a springy strand of my hair behind my ear. “What are you so afraid of? He’s just an ordinary person—not even half as wonderful as you are. Hold your head up, Betsy. He’s lucky to have the privilege of stepping out with you.”

“*Stepping out...*” I moaned. “I...I’ve never done this before. What on earth will I talk about all afternoon?”

“Listen to me,” she said sternly. “Calm down! It’s his job to start the conversation, not yours. Just don’t stop it dead by giving yes and no answers. Keep it going. Ask him a related question back.”

I held my breath as I walked down the stairs. I had no choice—the corset was that tight. If the laces ever snapped I would look like an exploding watermelon. Lydia’s shirt buttons would go flying in all directions and my skirt would probably split wide open like a gutted fish. I had half a mind to call the whole thing off—until I glimpsed the expression on my father’s face. It was the closest he had ever come to smiling. He was already dreaming of the magnificent orchard he would soon be part-owner of, thanks to me, and I couldn’t let him down. I just couldn’t.

I tried to smile, to breathe normally, to remember everything Lydia had told me as I said farewell and set off for the ice-cream social. At least I had good posture for the first time in my life, thanks to the corset stays. I couldn’t have slouched if I’d tried.

Frank held our front door open for me, then offered me his hand to help me up into his surrey. He looked so cold and formal in his Sunday suit and starched collar that the warmth of his palm took me by surprise and I forgot all about squeezing it until it was too late. When he sat down on the carriage seat beside me he left a discreet space between us and it would have been much too obvious to try to rearrange myself closer so our thighs could “accidentally” brush. Besides, I feared I might get frostbite. He held himself so aloof that I would have needed an ice pick to chip through the invisible shield that surrounded him.

“Are you comfortable, Miss Fowler?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes.”

“May I call you Betty?”

“Yes.”

Oh no! I was already giving yes and no answers! I nearly smacked my forehead in despair, but I hadn’t tested the corset’s full range of motion. It would look ridiculous if my arm didn’t reach that high and I ended up smacking thin air. Or worse still, what if I smacked too hard and I fell over backward and couldn’t right myself again? I’d once seen a box turtle in the same predicament.

We rode in silence for several minutes. I knew it was Frank’s job to lead the conversation, but I struggled to think of something to say so I wouldn’t disappoint my father. “Um...It turned out to be a lovely day for the social, didn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I wanted to shout, *Ha! I caught you! That was a yes and no answer!* But I didn’t think I could draw a deep enough breath to shout, let alone gloat.

“We’ve had just the right amount of rainfall this spring, haven’t we?” I asked, trying again.

“Yes.”

I would have heaved a sigh of frustration if my corset would have allowed it. This ridiculous courtship was a sham, an agonizing means to a mutually beneficial end, and Frank and I both knew it. The drive to church only lasted ten minutes but it seemed like ten years.

Everyone gaped when Frank Wyatt showed up on the church lawn with a woman on his arm—although they might have been gaping because it appeared as though poor Betty Fowler had her head ripped off of her frumpy body and pasted onto someone else's. Either way, we created quite a stir. Every maiden, spinster, and scheming mama in Deer Springs began calculating how they could win Frank Wyatt's attention now that he had finally decided to start courting. But courting Betty Butterball of all people? Who would have ever thought?

We made a ridiculous pair. Even with my astonishing new bosom I looked like a child beside Frank. He was tall and sun browned and muscular from years of hard work—and the top of my frizzy head didn't even reach his shoulder. I had to take five hurried steps to equal one of his strides, so I must have looked like a little lap dog with my tongue hanging out, trotting to keep up with him.

Although Frank was politely courteous and well-mannered, he never warmed up enough to risk melting the ice cream. He kept my lemonade glass filled and he generously spooned all the toppings onto my ice cream for me at the serving table, but he never asked me a single question about myself in order to become better acquainted. I tried very hard to like him, but the knowledge that he wasn't the least bit interested in me hampered my efforts. Every time Frank looked at me he saw my father's pond.

There were three-legged races for the couples and games like musical chairs, horseshoes, and croquet, but Frank showed no interest in any of them. I was just as glad. I could barely walk, let alone dash, bend, reach, or scramble. As we strolled around the church lawn,

Frank occasionally stopped to converse with one of the other men, forcing me to make small-talk with their girlfriends. It was hard work for me to be pleasant for an entire after-noon. I wasn't used to being sociable. Banty hens and books were my usual afternoon companions.

By the time Frank brought me home again I was exhausted. As soon as Lydia loosened my bonds, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. It was short-lived.

"Did you make a favorable impression?" Father demanded to know at the supper table. It was one of the few times in my life that my father had ever shown an interest in me.

"I tried, Father."

"You *tried*? That's *all*? I certainly expect you to do more than *try* if this merger is ever going to take place. Don't you realize that a man like Wyatt can take his pick of women when it's time for him to choose a wife?"

I recalled the scheming mamas all sizing up Frank Wyatt and stared at my mashed potatoes in misery. "Yes, Father."

"Don't slouch, Betty. Sit up. That's better. Did he ask you out again?"

"He said that he'll be busy with the orchard for a while, but he wondered if I would like to take a drive in the country with him sometime."

"Good. Good. I hope you were encouraging?"

"I told him I would be very pleased to ride with him."

"Good. Pass the green beans."

Father's health had been poor for months, so I was glad that this courtship was putting some life back into him. But I knew that today had been just the prologue. A long series of agonizing afternoons with Frank Wyatt would probably follow until he made up his mind whether or not my father's land was worth the sacrifice of marrying me. But I would persevere. Nellie Bly was indomitable and I would be,



too. My overwhelming concern was to not disappoint my father.

Frank courted me all that spring, usually on Sunday after-noons when work wasn't allowed. In June we went for a drive in the country, to a temperance lecture in the next town, and to a special missionary presentation at church.

"Do you belong to our Women's Missionary Guild, Betty?" he asked on the way home.

"No, I—"

"You must join."

I joined. I had taken "the pledge" after the temperance lecture, too. I would have stood on my head and spit wooden nickels if that's what it took to convince him I would make a satisfactory wife.

By July the entire town knew that we were an "item." Frank invited me to sit in the hallowed Wyatt pew with him one Sunday morning. Father was overjoyed.

"Good. You have the fish on the line," he said. "Now reel him in."

Whatever *that* meant. When I asked Lydia, she said it meant I should invite him home for Sunday dinner so he would know that I could cook. She faithfully coached me in the feminine art of courtship, but I seemed to be failing the course. Frank and I had courted for two months and he still hadn't stolen a kiss from me or even tried to hold my hand. The gap between us on the carriage seat was just as wide as it had been on our first date.

I couldn't help but compare Frank with the dashing, amorous heroes of my favorite novels, and he always came up short. I wasn't falling in love with him. In fact, the more time I spent with him the more I hated his cold, overbearing ways. But judging from my own experience and the example of my parents, I decided that love and romance must be the stuff of fiction, not real life. I learned to ignore the feeling of dread that settled in the pit of my stomach every time Frank arrived at my house and to disregard the gnawing unease I felt

each moment that I spent with him.

While my courtship with Frank plodded slowly on, Lydia reached a milestone of her own—she dated the same man two weeks in a row, then three! Ted Bartlett was a traveling notions salesman whose route brought him to Deer Springs on the train once a week.

“I’m in love, Betsy! Oh, this time I’m really in *love*!” Lydia exclaimed.

It was mid-July, and we lay crossways on the bed in our stifling room hoping that a breeze might find its way through our dormer windows. So far the only thing that had found its way inside was the mosquito that hummed with delight around my head.

“Tell me everything!” I said, smacking my own cheek as I missed the mosquito.

“Ted is unbelievably handsome! He has dark, wavy hair and a luxurious mustache that tickles when he kisses me.”

“You let him kiss you already?”

“Of course, silly. When I’m with Ted I never want him to stop kissing me. He makes me feel so...loved! I can’t describe how wonderful it is to feel his strong arms around me as he showers me with kisses. Or how glorious it is to rest my head against his broad chest and hear his heart beating beneath me.”

Lydia’d had more than her share of romances but I’d never heard her talk this passionately before. She made me feel like I was missing out on something. “Tell me more about him,” I begged.

“He’s a really sharp dresser, and he wears all the latest in men’s fashions. I’m sure he must be very rich. He’s from Chicago. That’s where we’ll live after we’re married.”

“He asked you to marry him?”

“Well, not yet, but I know that he will soon. He loves me, Betsy. He tells me he does all the time. Maybe Frank will ask you to marry him, too, and we can have a double wedding. Won’t it be wonderful?”

“Ouch!” I swatted uselessly at the mosquito again after he took a spiteful bite out of my leg. “A double wedding would be nice,” I lied. “I won’t be nearly as nervous if we go into this venture together. But to tell you the truth, I can’t imagine being married to Frank.”

“You mean sharing his bed?”

“Lydia!”

She laughed at my embarrassment. “Sharing a bed is wonderful when it’s with someone you really love.”

“How do you know?” I teased.

She gave me a playful shove. “Be quiet and go to sleep. I’ll dream about Ted and you can dream about Frank.”

But as I lay awake scratching mosquito bites, I didn’t have the heart to tell my sister that any dream about Frank would have been a nightmare.

# DEEL II

## Lydia se verhaal

*Deer Springs 1894*

Ons moet engele wees vir mekaar sodat ons mekaar  
kan versterk en vertroos. Want eers wanneer ons besef  
die lewensbeker is nie net 'n beker van smart nie, maar ook 'n beker  
van vreugde, sal ons daaruit kan drink.

Henri Nouwen

## ~ Hoofstuk ses ~

My suster, Lydia, was die mooiste meisie in Deer Springs ... en ek die eenvoudigste. Lydia kon ure lank na haarself in die spieël kyk, maar ek het altyd my kop weggedraai wanneer ek verby een loop, want ek het gehaat wat ek sien. My gesig was so rond en eenvoudig soos 'n soetkoekie met 'n neus soos dié van 'n Romeinse keiser reg in die middel daarvan. En my lyf ... Wel, my lyf moes beslis al volwassenheid bereik het teen die tyd dat ek my twintigste verjaardag gevier het, maar ek was nog net so mollig met 'n plat bors. My ma het gedurig aan my gekarring omdat my skouers hang en my gewaarsku dat my rugstring permanent so gebuig sal bly as ek nie regop staan nie. Maar my skoolmaats se gespot en die bynaam “Betty Botterbol” het harder in my ore opgeklink as enige van my ma se waarskuwings. Ek was kort en vet en dit was dit.

My skouerlengte hare was nie kastaiingbruin soos Lydia s'n of rooibruin of blond of die een of ander pragtige kleur soos die heldinne in my gunsteling storieboeke nie. Dit was 'n doodgewone bruin, soos 'n veldmuis se pels. Die onbeheerbare krulle het soos 'n bos om my kop gestaan en geweier om netjies te bly. My oë onder die dik, swaar wenkbroue was nie donker en misterieus soos Lydia s'n met daardie ryk glinstering van brons fluweel nie. Dit was nie eens 'n interessante kleur soos karamel of die kleur van sandelhout nie. Dit was doodgewone bruin, soos die kleur van grond. Dit is daarom seker geen wonder dat alles wat ek van liefde en romanse geweet het uit boeke gekom het nie. Dit is ook geen wonder dat ek nooit 'n enkele kêrel gehad het totdat Frank Wyatt my die hof gemaak het nie. Lydia was die een wat kêrels aangetrek het soos bye na appelbloeisels.

Lydia was sewentien maande jonger as ek, en van die dag dat sy veertien geword het, het haar verleidelike lyf meer kurwes gehad as 'n kronkelpad. As sy nie my beste vriendin was nie, sou ek haar verseker gehaat het. Die twee van ons was egter so geheg aan mekaar as wat susters kan wees; deur ons onverbiddelike, prakties ingestelde ouers gedwing om na mekaar te draai vir liefde en vertroosting. Hulle het geweier om ons liefdevol aan te raak of vas te druk uit vrees dat ons opgepiep en bederf sou wees.

“Kinders het dissipline en orde in hulle lewe nodig,” het my ma geglo, “nie 'n nuttelose gedruk nie.” Haar tipiese antwoord op al ons wonde en hartseer was: “Stop jou gesanik.”

My pa het met my ma, 'n oujongnoui-skooljuffrou, getrou toe sy vyf en dertig en hy twee en veertig was. Hy het sy eerste vrou en twee seuns in 'n cholera-epidemie verloor en het gehoop om weer 'n seun te hê wat sy plaas kon erf. In plaas daarvan was hy baie teleurgesteld toe hy opgeskeep sit met twee dogters. Ná Lydia se moeilike geboorte, het my ma hom onmiddellik na sy eie kamer geskuif en dit so duidelik gemaak dat hy nie nog kinders by haar sal hê nie.

Aangesien teerheid en simpatie nie in ons huis te vind was nie, het ek en Lydia geleer om op mekaar te steun. “Ek sal jou beskermengel wees, Betsy,” het sy belowe, “en jy myne.” Toe ek agt en 'n half en sy sewe was, het ons 'n plegtige eed afgelê om na mekaar om te sien en dit met 'n “pinkiebelofte” bevestig. Ons het mekaar nooit in die steek gelaat nie.

Dit is waarom ek in uiterste miserabelheid na Lydia gedraai het nadat ek graad agt op skool klaargemaak en my pa my ingelig het wat die toekomstige verloop van my lewe sou wees. Hy het my een heerlike somerdag van my skommelstoel en storieboek op die voorstoep af weggeroep voorkamer toe. Dit was 'n somber, kleurlose vertrek met uitgetrapte matte op die vloer en vaal prente teen die kaal gepleisterde mure; 'n vertrek wat selfs in die somer koud was. Ons het in 'n era van sierlike Victoriaanse valle grootgeword – perdehaarrusbanke met fraiings omsoom en oorgetrek met sy en damas, vertoonkaste met glasdeure vol ornamente en tierlantyntjies, muurpapier vol patrone, gehekelde doilies en stoelkleedjies – maar ons plaashuis was net so eenvoudig en koud soos my bedrukte ouers. Ons het nie 'n grammofoon of 'n towerlantern besit nie – nie eens 'n klavier of 'n klein orrel nie. Die geluid van die horlosie op die kaggelrak wat die gang van tyd uittik, was in die aand ons geselskap waar ons op die eenvoudige, onpaar meubels gesit het waarvan ander mense ontslae geraak het. Dit is waar Pa op daardie warm middag vir my gesê het om te sit en komende van hom het sy planne vir my toekoms soos 'n doodsklok geklink.

“Ek het besluit jy sal volgende herfs met jou opvoeding voortgaan,” het hy aangekondig. “Jy sal 'n onderwyseres word, soos jou ma.”

“Maar ek wil nie 'n onderwyseres word nie,” het ek uitgeroep. In my vrugbare maar naïewe verbeelding het ek daarvan gedroom om na die stad New York toe te gaan en 'n koerantverslaggewer te word soos my rolmodel, Nellie Bly. Die skrikwekkende gedagte dat ek die hele dag vasgevang moet wees in 'n klein eenklaskamer-skooltjie saam met twee dosyn koppige plaaskinders het my vir die eerste keer in my lewe die vrymoedigheid gegee om my mond oop te maak.

“Asseblief, Pa, moet my nie dwing om 'n onderwyseres te word nie. Ek wil

'n koerantverslaggewer wees en soos Nellie Bly vir die *New York World* skryf."

"Dit is buite die kwessie. Dit is nie 'n geskikte loopbaan vir 'n jong vrou nie, en die stad New York is ook nie 'n geskikte plek om te bly nie. Jy sal 'n onderwyseres word."

En daarmee was dit klaar. Dit sou nie help om met hom te probeer redeneer nie; ek kon dan netsowel probeer vlieg, en sou dit nog makliker regkry ook. Hy was my pa en ek moes hom gehoorsaam. Pa's was gode in hulle eie huishoudings; hy het bepaal wanneer ons opstaan en wanneer ons gaan slaap, wie ons mag sien en wie nie, hoe ons dink, hoe ons optree, hoe ons voel. Ek kon net so min die koers van my eie lewe bepaal as wat die koeie kon besluit wanneer hulle gemelk sal word. Dit was ondenkbaar om hom teë te gaan. Later daardie aand het ek my smart en teleurstelling op Lydia se skouer uitgestort.

"Moenie huil nie, Betsy. Dit is 'n groot eer om onderwyskollege toe te gaan," probeer sy my gerusstel. "Het jy my nie vertel dat Nellie Bly ook studeer het om 'n onderwyseres te word nie?"

"Wel ... Ja, tot haar pa dood is en sy nie meer geld gehad het nie."

"Sien jy! Jy kan nog steeds 'n koerantverslaggewer word, net soos sy."

"Is my toekoms dan nie h-hopeloos nie?" vra ek en snik kliphard deur my trane. Ek vat die sakdoek wat Lydia na my toe uithou en blaas my snawel van 'n neus.

Ons is in ons solderkamer waar ons al ons geheime en 'n dubbelbed deel, asook 'n antieke laaikas met drie laaie en 'n onafgewerkte hangkas met muise in. Ons het die bed tot in die middel van die muur geskuif, ingedruk tussen die twee dakvensters sodat ons in die aand na die sterre kan lê en kyk, selfs al is die enkelpaneel-vensters so dun dat daar soms in die winter aan die binnekant ys vorm. Ons het lankal geleer om vroegoggend versigtig regop te sit sodat ons nie ons koppe teen die steil helling van die dak stamp nie. So koud as wat dit in die winter was, so warm en bedompig was dit in die somer met die son wat die hele dag die sinkdak reg bo ons koppe gebak het. Toe ons mekaar op daardie warm somersnag met ons dun nagrokke aan vashou, het ons natgeswete arms aan mekaar geklou asof dit met gom vasgeplak is.

"Dit is glad nie hopeloos nie," sê Lydia. "Pappa weet jy het al die verstand in hierdie familie geërf en daarom maak hy seker jy kry 'n goeie opvoeding. Kyk na my ... Ek is so onnosel ek sal waarskynlik nooit eers graad agt haal nie. Al wat ek ooit sal kan wees, is 'n vrou en ma. Om 'n onderwyseres te wees is ten minste glansryk."

"Ha! Hoekom is onderwyseresse dan altyd oujongnooiens?"

“Jy sal nie ’n oujongnooi wees nie, Betsy,” sê sy en vryf my onbeheerste krulle uit my gesig uit. “Jy sal ’n baie spesiale man kry wat – ”

“Ek wil nie ’n man hê nie. Ek wil ’n koerantverslaggewer word en so dapper en avontuurlistig wees soos Nellie Bly. Ek wil ongeregtigheid en korrupsie blootlê en die wêreld verander soos sy dit doen.”

Nellie Bly was drie en twintig en ek veertien toe sy gemaak het of sy kranksinnig is sodat sy oor die lewe in ’n berugte gestig vir vroue kon skryf. Haar waagmoed het vir haar die werk by *The New York World* losgeslaan en haar avontuurlustige loopbaan as ’n verslaggewer begin. Ek was mal daaroor om van haar ervarings te lees – sy het gemaak of sy ’n ongehude ma is om die handel in babas bloot te lê, gemaak of sy ’n dief is ten einde te sien wat in ’n tronk in New York gebeur, en so meer. In ’n era toe die meeste vroue maar net ornamente aan hulle man se arm was, was Nellie ’n onafhanklike vrou wat dit gewaag het om ’n manswêreld te betree en te bewys sy is net so goed soos hulle – dalk selfs beter.

My drome om ’n koerantverslaggewer te word sou egter moes wag. Ek is daardie herfs kollege toe en het begin studeer om ’n onderwyseres te word, soos my pa besluit het. Tydens my tweede jaar het Nellie Bly die wonderlikste avontuur van haar lewe gehad: Sy het heeltemal op haar eie om die wêreld gereis in ’n poging om die held in Jules Verne se roman *Around the World in Eighty Days* te oortref. Vir twee en ’n half maande het die hele wêreld haar vordering getrou gevolg terwyl sy oor land en see gereis het, en teruggekeer het na New York in slegs twee en sewentig dae, ses ure, elf minute en veertien sekondes. Sy was die bekendste vrou in die wêreld en ek wou net soos sy wees.

My gunsteling onderwyser, meneer Herman, het geweet hoe baie ek daarvan hou om van Nellie te lees en hy het altyd vir my sy *New York World* gegee sodra hy daarmee klaar was. Ek het ’n plakboek gemaak van al haar kordaatstukke en het die een notaboek ná die ander volgemaak met my eie heldedade wat in my verbeelding afgespeel het. Wanneer ek nie geskryf het nie, het ek gelees; ek het boeke so vinnig deurgewerk soos wat meneer Herman dit vir my geleen het.

“Jy is my beste student, Betty,” het hy op ’n dag vir my gesê nadat ek *Sense and Sensibility* klaar gelees het, “maar ek is bekommerd oor hoe jy as ’n onderwyseres sal vaar. Jy is so klein en saggeaard, ek is bang die kinders sal jou aansien as een van hulle.”

Dit was sy ordentlike manier om vir my te sê ek is uiters kort en baie skaam – en die rowwe plaaskinders gaan die vloer met my was.

“Ek wil nie regtig ’n onderwyseres wees nie, meneer Herman,” bely ek toe.



“Dit was my pa se idee. Ek wil eintlik ’n koerantverslaggewer wees soos Nellie Bly.”

Hy het ’n oomblik nagedink voordat hy my geantwoord het. “Dit kan ook ’n moeilike loopbaan wees vir iemand so ... so teruggetrokke soos jy.” Hy kon “onskuldig” of “naïef” of “bang vir jou eie skaduwee” bygevoeg het. Die waarheid is, al het ek hoe baie daarvan gehou om van Nellie Bly se kordaatstukke te lees, sou ek dood neergeval het indien avontuur my op die skouer kom klop het.

Meneer Herman moes gesien het hoe my ken bewe en my oë vol tranes skiet, want hy het gou bygevoeg: “Moet my nie verkeerd verstaan nie. Jy is ’n baie begaafde skrywer, Betty. Ek geniet dit om alles te lees wat jy skryf. Jou werk staan kop en skouers bo dié van jou klasmaats uit. Ek dink net nie dat ’n loopbaan as speurjoernalis reg is vir jou nie.”

“Ek skryf soms gedigte,” blaker ek dit toe uit.

Hy het sagmoedig geglimlag. “Ja, ek sien jou meer as ’n Elizabeth Barrett Browning as ’n Nellie Bly.”

“Wil Meneer een daarvan lees?”

“Dit sal vir my ’n eer wees.”

Ek het egter nooit die kans gehad om vir hom my gedigte te wys of om my studies te voltooi of om ’n onderwyseres te word nie – wat nog te sê ’n speurjoernalis. My ma het siek geword die jaar nadat ek agtien geword het en Pa het my gedwing om my studies op te skort sodat ek vir haar kon sorg en die huishouding kon bestuur. Lydia het teen daardie tyd ’n goeie werk by die goederewinkel in Deer Springs gehad en Pa wou nie haar salaris prysgee wat sy elke week vir hom huis toe gebring het nie.

Ek dink nie Lydia het juis hard gewerk by die winkel nie. Die eienaar het haar doodeenvoudig agter die toonbank laat staan en gesê sy moet glimlag. Die kompeterende winkel aan die ander kant van die dorp het gou bankrot gespeel. Elke verkoopsman en boerseun wat by die deur ingestap het, het dadelik verlief geraak op haar en sou enigiets by haar koop. Gee vir Lydia op ’n sonskyndag twee dosyn sambrele en dit sal teen twaalfuur uitverkoop wees. Sy was die winkel se kosbaarste bate, en sy het dit geweet.

Dit het my nie gepla om by die huis te bly en Mamma te versorg nie. Sy het daarvan gehou as ek hardop vir haar lees wanneer sy wakker was, en wanneer sy geslaap het, het ek tyd gehad om te skryf – dis nou natuurlik nadat ek klaar was met kosmaak, huis skoonmaak en die wasgoed.

Ek het soms eensaam gevoel, maar Lydia het my elke aand vermaak met skreeusnaakse staaltjies van al die nuutste skinderstories in Deer Springs. Sy kon beskryf hoe sy materiaal aan ou Myrtle Barstow verkoop het en ek sou

my maag vashou van al die lag. Dan sou sy vra: “Het jy vandag enige gedigte geskryf, Betsy? Jy moet vir my een van jou gedigte lees.” Lydia het my altyd aangespoor om te skryf.

Die meeste van my gedigte het my ingeperkte wêreld beskryf – hoe die boord saam met die seisoene verander het, die blousangvoëls en eekhorings wat die sade kom eet wat ek buite vir hulle gooi, die bokooi en haar twee lammers wat in die aand by ons dam kom drink. Een aand het Lydia twee van my gedigte in haar mooi handskrif oorgeskryf en my oorreed om dit vir ’n tydskrif te stuur.

“Ek sweer as jy dit nie instuur nie, sal ek,” het sy gesê en haar voet gestamp om te beklemtoon hoe ernstig sy is. Lydia het elke dag in die regte wêreld gewerk en geleer om haar gesprekke te laai met skandalige frases soos “ek sweer” en “goeie heiland”.

Toe ek uiteindelik ingee, het sy my gehelp om ’n dekbrief te skryf wat net so vol selfvertroue en selfversekerd geklink het soos Lydia altyd is; nie beskeie en verskonend, soos ek tipies is nie. Ons het ons pinkies om mekaar gekrul vir goeie geluk en toe my gedigte weggestuur. Tot my groot verbasing het *Garden Magazine* toe een daarvan gepubliseer en my gevra om nog te stuur. Ek en Lydia het gedans en gehuil en mekaar van vreugde omhels. My betaling was slegs twee gratis eksemplare van die tydskrif, maar ek het nie omgee nie. Ek was in ekstase om net my naam – my gedigte! – vir die eerste keer in druk te sien.

Die volgende dag het Lydia die weeklikse *Deer Springs News* huis toe gebring. Sy het net vir die koerantverkoper geglimlag en toe gee hy dit verniet vir haar.

“Hier, dit is vir jou,” het sy vir my gesê. “Jy móét iets vir die koerant skryf.” Ek het dit dadelik vir haar teruggegee.

“Ek kan nie vir die plaaslike koerant skryf nie. Hoe kan ek ’n speurjoernalis wees terwyl ek die hele dag hier in ’n plaashuis vasgekeer sit? Ek sien al die opskrifte: ‘Skandaal blootgelê in Fowler se hoenderhok,’ of dalk: ‘Groot opskudding in Betty se skuur.’”

“Skryf vir die redakteur ’n brief, Betsy. Het jy nie vir my vertel dat dit is hoe Nellie Bly met haar loopbaan begin het nie?”

Lydia was reg. Volgens wat vertel word, het Nellie ’n rubriek in die *Pittsburgh Dispatch* gelees wat gesê het vroue is buite die huwelik heeltemal nutteloos vir enigiets anders. Nellie was woedend en het ’n snydende antwoord geskryf wat die *Dispatch* se redakteur so vermaak het dat hy vir haar werk aangebied het.

“Daar is niks in die *Deer Springs News* wat ’n woedende antwoord waardig

is nie,” het ek gesug nadat ek dit van voor tot agter deurgelees het. “Selfs al was daar, lyk dit nie of die redakteur juis ’n sin vir humor het nie. Ek dink nie enigiets wat ek skryf, sal hom vermaak nie.”

Teen my flou besware in het Lydia ’n kort stukkie gekies wat ek oor lentetyd in die boord geskryf het en dit vir die redakteur gestuur. Ons albei was in die wolke toe die koerant my \$1,75 daarvoor betaal het – my heel eerste salaris. Met ons saamgekrulde pinkies hoog gelig om dit te vier het ek Lydia bederf met ’n vrugteroomys by die roomyswinkel in die dorp. Lydia se glimlag het die jong man agter die toonbank so betower dat hy vir ons albei twee skeppe gegee het vir die prys van een.

Mamma het nooit van haar siekte herstel nie. Nadat sy vir byna twee jaar bedlêend was, is sy dood in die jaar toe ek twintig geword het. Teen daardie tyd het my pa se gesondheid ook begin agteruitgaan en op die ouderdom van drie en sestig het hy dit al hoe moeiliker gevind om die plaaswerk te doen. Gekonfronteer met sy eie sterflikheid het hy besef dit is sy plig om vir my en Lydia se toekoms te sorg. Hy het met ’n plan vorendag gekom wat die meeste romans “skandelik” sou noem.

Ek was een oggend in Mei halfhartig in die kombuis besig om brooddeeg te knie met *A Tale of Two Cities* wat teen die meelblik regop staan toe Frank Wyatt daar aankom om my pa te sien.

Ek het baie min van Frank geweet, behalwe dat hy ’n diaken in ons kerk was, ongetroud en omtrent agt of nege jaar ouer as ek. Sy voorouers was van die gemeenskap se vroegste setlaars en het op die grond geboer aan die noordelike kant van ons plaas se grens. Frank het sy pa se hele landgoed geërf en was stadig maar seker besig om al die eiendom te koop waarop hy sy hande kon lê. Hy wou Wyatt-boorde opbou tot ’n koninkryk met homself as koning daarvan.

“Betty, kom hier,” het my pa skielik vanuit die voorkamer geroep. Sy stem was van só aard dat dit jou alles laat los en hardloop het, of jy nou meel aan jou hande het of nie. Toe ek by die vertrek inkom, het Frank Wyatt soos ’n ware heer opgestaan, al het hy net ’n oorpak aangehad.

“Goeiemôre, juffrou Fowler,” het hy gesê en liggies gebuig. Frank was baie aantreklik op ’n growwe, eenvoudige manier met ’n keep in sy sterk ken, hare soos die flou winterson en oë die kleur van ’n gevriesde stroom. Sy bewegings was styf, asof hy ongemaklik is in sy eie breed geskouerde liggaam, en ongeag of hy sit of staan, het Frank altyd gelyk of hy vir ’n foto poseer. Die uitdrukking op sy streng gesig wanneer hy Sondae die offerande opgeneem het, het my altyd so miserabel laat voel dat ek die totale inhoud van my beursie in die mandjie wou gooi. Tog het Frank Wyatt so ’n vlekkelose

reputasie in die kerk en gemeenskap gehad dat God hom dalk nog uit dieselfde stuk klip as die Tien Gebooie gemaak het.

“Bring vir ons koffie,” beveel my pa nou.

“Moet asseblief nie moeite doen nie, meneer Fowler,” sê Frank en sprei sy massiewe hande oop. “Ek kan nie lank bly nie. Ek het net kom kyk hoe dit hier gaan. Die dominee het Sondag in die kerk gesê dat jy weer siek is en –”

“Nie dat dit enigiets met hóm te doen het nie,” sê Pa knorrig.

“Ek het gewonder of jy dalk hulp nodig het. Ek het ’n span werkers wat later die week daar na my toe kom en –”

“Jy mislei my nie met jou kalm maniertjies nie,” val Pa hom in die rede. “Vandat ek verlede winter siek geword het, hang jy gereeld hier rond. Jy wil nog steeds jou hande op my eiendom kry, of hoe?” My pa se reaksie op meneer Wyatt se vriendelike aanbod is so onbeskof dat ek omdraai en kombuis toe probeer vlug. “Betty, kom terug en sit,” skree Pa. “Ek wil hê jy moet ook hoor wat ek te sê het.”

Ek doen wat Pa beveel. Ek gaan sit en staar na Frank Wyatt se nerfak werkstewels terwyl my wange brand van verleentheid.

“Dit is my dam wat jy wil hê, nè?” vra Pa vir hom.

“Jou dam is genoeg om elke boer in die omgewing jaloers te maak, meneer Fowler, en –”

“Jy het verlede winter aangebied om my grond te koop wanneer ek dit ook al wil verkoop. Onthou jy dit?”

“Ja, Meneer.”

“Stel jy nog belang?”

Ek kyk op na Frank. Hy kwyl byna van afwagting. Hy sukkel om sy opgewondenheid agter ’n kalm fasade weg te steek. “Ek voel dit is my Christelike plig om ander in hulle tyd van nood te help. Dit is die enigste rede waarom ek hier is. Tog staan my aanbod steeds, indien jy besluit om te verkoop.”

“Om die waarheid te sê, ek wil nie verkoop nie. Ek het nie al die jare hard gewerk om hierdie plek op te bou net sodat ek dit eendag aan vreemdelinge kan verkoop nie. Ek het hard gewerk sodat my kinders en kleinkinders iets sal hê om te erf wanneer ek weg is. Ek het baie hande arbeid in hierdie grond gestort. Ongelukkig het die Almagtige besluit om vir my net dogters te gee. Dit is dus wat ek besluit het. Ek gee alles vir my dogter Betty as ’n trougeskenk. As jy my grond wil hê, moet jy met haar trou.”

Ek weet nie wat groter is nie – my absolute verskrikking of my absolute vernedering. Hoe kan Pa sy eie dogter aanbied as deel van ’n transaksie, asof ek ’n stoetdier of ’n nuwe ploeg is? Hoe onregverdig om meneer Wyatt te

dwing om te besluit of hy ons grond graag genoeg wil hê om as deel van die ooreenkoms met my te trou? Ek weet hoe Lea, die lelike ouer suster in die Bybel, moes gevoel het toe sy geluister het hoe die konkelende Jakob en skelm Laban oor haar gestry het. Dit verg al my wilskrag om nie in trane uit te bars of uit die vertrek te hardloop nie.

As my pa se reguit aanbod vir Frank afsit, wys hy dit glad nie. “Jy is te vrygewig, meneer Fowler,” sê hy gladweg. “Enige man in Deer Springs sal geëerd voel om met ’n goeie Christelike vrou soos jou dogter te trou, selfs al het sy geen grond op haar naam nie.”

Ek voel groot dankbaarheid teenoor hom omdat hy die angel uit my pa se woorde probeer haal, selfs al is dit die grootste bog. Elke man in Deer Springs wil met Lydia trou, nie met my nie.

My pa staan op, ’n teken dat die onderhandeling afgehandel is. “Nou weet jy hoe dinge staan, Wyatt,” sê hy met ’n diep frons op sy voorkop. “As jy belangstel, kan jy begin deur haar die hof te maak. Jy het toestemming om my dogter te kom besoek.”

“Dankie,” sê Frank en staan ook op. Hy aarsel ’n oomblik, asof hy iets oordink. “Daar is volgende Saterdagmiddag ’n sosiale byeenkoms by die kerk. Dit sal vir my heerlik wees as jy saam met my sal kom, juffrou Fowler.” Ek kry dit reg om te knik, maar kan myself nie sover kry om vir hom te kyk nie. “Goed. Ek sal jou so rondom twee-uur kom haal.”

Dan groet hy en los my alleen by my pa. Ek voel eensaam, diep bedroef. Ek kan nie van my stoel af opstaan nie. “Meneer Wyatt wil nie met my trou nie,” sê ek sag.

“Nonsens. Hy wil ons grond hê. Hy is ’n hardwerkende man. Hy sal ’n goeie skoonseun wees.” Pa het duidelik die situasie in terme van sy eie belange geanaliseer. Hy het nooit eens gevra wat my wense of drome is nie. Ek voel vasgekeer.

“Maar ... maar sê nou ek wil nie met hom trou nie?”

“Jy sal doen wat ek vir jou sê om te doen,” sê my pa. “Ek weet wat die beste vir jou is. Verstaan jy my mooi?” Die trane wat ek nog die hele tyd probeer onderdruk, loop nou oor my wange. Dit lyk nie of Pa my smart raaksien terwyl hy hom in sy oorwinning verlustig nie. “Jong Wyatt het nog altyd sy oog op my grond, maar wat hy nie besef nie, is dat ek Wyatt-boorde net so graag wil hê. Hy dink hy kry my grond, maar hy vergeet dat ek ook syne kry. Wyatt-boorde sal eendag aan my kleinseun behoort. Ek sal daarop aandring dat hy dit hernoem na Wyatt & Fowler-boorde.”

“Ek is seker meneer Wyatt sal baie eerder met Lydia trou as met my,” sê ek en vee my oë af. “Dalk moet Pa vir hom ’n keuse gee.”

“Lydia!” sê hy verbaas. “Sy sal nie sukkel om ’n man te kry of vir haarself ’n lewe te maak nie. Op hierdie manier kan ek seker maak dat jy ook trou, en goed ook.”

Ek voel in twee geskeur. Aan die een kant wil ek my pa tevrede stel en uiteindelik ná al die jare sy liefde en goedkeuring wen, maar aan die ander kant begeer ek om weg te vlug van hierdie skrikwekkende ooreenkoms en om in ’n groot stad aansoek te doen vir ’n werk as joernalis. Ten spyte van my beperkte sukses as skrywer het ek geen selfvertroue nie. Ek is doodbang vir die onbekende – bang om te trou, maar ook vir die lewe alleen in ’n vreemde stad. Daardie aand in ons slaapkamer stort ek al my smart teenoor Lydia uit.

“Jislaaik, Betsy, dis wonderlike nuus,” sê sy opgewonde. “Frank Wyatt is baie aantreklik.”

“Ja, as jy daarvan hou dat ’n hekpaal jou die hof maak.” Ek loop styf deur ons kamer om hom na te maak.

“Hy is dalk ’n bietjie sedig,” sê sy laggend. “Maar goeie genugtig, hy is ryk. Hy is een van Deer Springs se beste oujongkêrels.”

“Ek weet nie eens hoe ek hom onder hierdie omstandighede in die oë kan kyk nie,” kreun ek en val agteroor op die bed neer. “Pa dwing hom so te sê om met my te trou.”

“Bog! Meneer Wyatt sal niks doen wat hy nie wil doen nie; nie eens vir grond nie. In elk geval, as daar dan ’n stormloop mans moet wees wat met jou probeer trou net om die plaas te erf, is dit beter dat meneer Wyatt eerste hier kom as ’n hele spul ander niksnutte wat ek kan opnoem.”

Ek laat sak my gesig in my hande. “Hy vat my Saterdag na die sosiale byeenkoms by die kerk en ek weet nie waarom ek die hele middag lank met hom gaan gesels nie.”

“Wil jy weet wat ek dink? Ek dink meneer Wyatt is net so skaam soos jy. Hoekom anders sal hy nog al die tyd ongetroud wees?” Lydia trek aan my hande totdat sy dit voor my gesig weg het en ek regop sit. “Komaan, ek sal jou ’n paar truuks leer wat mans mal maak.”

Wanneer dit by mans kom, is Lydia ’n kenner. Sy lei in die geheim ’n wilde lewe en breek elke week ’n ander jong man se hart. Ek help haar om verskonings uit te dink deur te sê sy besoek huisgebondenenes of moet laat werk omdat hulle voorraad tel, en arme Pa glo ons. Ek hoor dan die fassinerende detail van haar eskapades wanneer sy later die aand by die huis kom – ’n partytjie by die verbode danssaal, ’n groot kampvuur by die meer, ’n geheime ontmoeting met ’n reisende verkoopsman – en ek skryf elke nuwe ervaring neer asof dit die nuutste hoofstuk in ’n roman is.

“Eerste,” begin sy, “wanneer meneer Wyatt jou in sy perdekar help, laat jy

jou hand net 'n oomblik in syne bly en druk dit baie saggies – só.”

“Bedoel jy ek moet sy hand vat? Hy is so 'n standbeeld ek is bang sy aanraking sal my ook in 'n klip verander.”

“Eerder in goud. Ek sweer, alles waaraan hy raak, verander in goud, Betsy, nie in klip nie. Maak seker jy sit naby genoeg aan hom sodat jou bobeen per ongeluk teen syne skuur – só.”

Ek sidder teen wil en dank. “Ag, Lydia, ek kan nie. Die blote idee daaraan gee my die koue rillings.”

“Moenie 'n ou melkdermpie wees nie. Luister, as hy iets snaaks sê, selfs al is dit nie regtig so snaaks nie, moet jy só lag” – sy demonstreer met 'n vrolike, klokhelder lag – “en raak dan baie vlugtig aan sy arm of bors terwyl jy lag.”

“Ek kan my nie indink dat Frank Wyatt sal grappies maak nie.”

“Jy is reg,” sê Lydia en frons. “Nou goed dan, vertel hom hoe wonderlik hy is. Vlei hom. Mans is mal daaroor as jy hulle ego streel.”

“Jig. Ek sal waarskynlik opbring.”

“Dink iets uit. Dit is jou kans om fiksie te skryf, Betsy. Probeer dit net. Moet ook nie terugdeins as hy jou probeer soen nie.”

“Sy lippe is so dun en styf dat sy soen waarskynlik sal wegspring indien hy probeer.”

“Jy is so snaaks,” sê sy en gee my 'n stywe druk. “Wees net jou wonderlike, skerpsinnige self en ek sweer hy sal dolverlief raak op jou.”

Ek is nie so seker nie.

Op die middag van die sosiale byeenkoms doen Lydia my hare en leen vir my haar syhemp met die skaapboudmoue om saam met my Sondagromp aan te trek. Sy bring 'n splinternuwe, langlyf vyfknoop korset van haar werk af huis toe en forseer my daarin voordat sy die toutjies inryg en styftrek sodat al die vetrolletjies om my middel geen ander plek het om heen te gaan nie behalwe boontoe, en daarmee saam lig dit my klein borste ook op. Ek staar ongelowig na myself in die spieël. Vir die eerste keer in my lewe lyk my middel dun en my borste vol.

“Daar's hy! Jy is asemrowend,” roep my suster uit.

“Lydia, ek kan nie asemhaal nie,” sê ek.

“Nou moet dan nie.”

“Sê nou ek word flou? Ek voel al klaar lighoofdig en ek het nog nie eens probeer loop nie.”

“Goed so. Jy mag maar flou word. Dit is waarvoor vlugsout is. Meneer Wyatt sal dink dit is jou fyn, vroulike gestel en dit sal hom soos 'n ware man laat voel om jou in sy arms te vang.”

“Ha! Hy sal my eerder soos 'n boomstomp op die grond laat val.”

Lydia doen die laaste afronding – ’n tikkie rooisel op my ronde wange, haar eie versierde kammetjie in my hare, Mamma se kameeborsspeld teen my nek. Ek voel soos ’n skoolmeisie wat aantrek-aantrek speel. Dan hoor ek die geluid van perdehoewe in die laning onder ons vensters. Frank Wyatt is hier, presies op tyd.

“Bring die skottel, Lydia. Ek gaan opbring.”

“Nee, jy gaan nie. Moenie ’n papbroek wees nie.” Sy glimlag en druk ’n los stukkie hare agter my oor in. “Hoekom is jy so bang? Hy is net ’n doodgewone mens en nie eens die helfte so wonderlik soos jy nie. Hou jou kop hoog, Betsy. Hy is gelukkig om die voorreg te hê om jou uit te neem.”

“My uit te neem ... ” kreun ek. “Ek ... ek het dit nog nooit voorheen gedoen nie. Waaroer gaan ek die hele liewe middag gesels?”

“Luister na my,” sê sy streng. “Kalmmer. Dit is sy werk om die gesprek aan die gang te sit, nie joune nie. Moet net nie die gesprek kelder deur die hele tyd ja en nee te sê nie. Hou dit aan die gang. Vra op jou beurt weer vir hom ’n vraag wat met die onderwerp te doen het.”

Ek hou my asem op toe ek met die trappe afgaan ondertoe. Ek kan eintlik nie anders nie; die korset is te styf. As die toutjies skielik moet breek of losgaan, sal ek soos ’n ontploffende waatlemoen lyk. Lydia se hems knope sal in alle rigtings vlieg en my romp sal waarskynlik oopskeur, soos ’n vis wat oopgesny word. Ek oorweeg dit om die hele ding stop te sit, totdat ek die uitdrukking op my pa se gesig sien. Dit is die naaste wat ek hom nog ooit aan ’n glimlag gesien het. Hy droom reeds van die pragtige boord waarvan hy binnekort, te danke aan my, mede-eienaar gaan wees en ek kan hom nie in die steek laat nie. Ek kan dit eenvoudig nie doen nie.

Terwyl ek groet, probeer ek glimlag, probeer normaal asemhaal, probeer alles onthou wat Lydia vir my gesê het. Ten minste het ek vir die eerste keer in my lewe, en dit te danke aan die stywe korset, ’n goeie postuur. Ek kan nie vooroor sit nie, al wil ek.

Frank hou ons voordeur vir my oop en hou dan sy hand uit om my in sy perdekarretjie te help. Hy lyk so koud en formeel in sy Sondagspak en gestyfde kraag dat die warmte van sy palm my onkant vang en ek heeltemal vergeet om dit saggies te druk. Toe hy langs my op die karretjie se sitplek kom sit, los hy ’n diskrete spasie tussen ons en dit sal heeltemal te opsigtelik wees as ek myself nou nader skuif sodat ons bobene “per ongeluk” aan mekaar kan raak. Ek is in elk geval bang dat ek vriesbrand sal kry. Hy hou homself so afsydig dat ek ’n yspik nodig sal hê om deur die onsigbare skild om hom te kap.

“Is jy gemaklik, juffrou Fowler?” vra hy skielik.



“Ja.”

“Mag ek jou Betty noem?”

“Ja.”

Agge nee! Ek gee al reeds ja en nee antwoorde. Ek klap myself amper uit pure moedeloosheid teen die voorkop, maar ek het nog nie getoets hoeveel beweging die korset my toelaat nie. Dit sal belaglik lyk as my arm nie so hoog kan bykom nie en dit lyk of ek na iets onsigbaars in die lug klap. Of erger nog, sê nou ek klap te hard, val agteroor en kan dan nie weer regop kom nie? Ek het al een keer ’n skilpad in dieselfde penarie gesien.

Ons ry vir ’n paar minute in stilte. Ek weet dit is Frank se taak om die gesprek te lei, maar ek sukkel om aan iets te dink om te sê sodat ek nie my pa teleurstel nie. “Mm ... Dit is toe op die ou einde ’n lieflike dag vir die byeenkoms, nê?” sê ek.

“Ja.”

Ek skree amper: *Ha! Ek het jou uitgevang. Dit is ’n ja-en-nee-antwoord.* Gelukkig kan ek nie diep genoeg asemhaal om te skree nie, wat nog te sê my daarin verlustig.

“Ons het hierdie lente presies genoeg reën gehad, of hoe?” probeer ek weer.

“Ja.”

As my korset dit toegelaat het, sou ek nou uit pure frustrasie gesug het. Hierdie belaglike hofmakery is pure voorgee, ’n folterende middel tot ’n wedersyds voordelige doel, en ek en Frank weet dit albei. Die rit kerk toe duur net tien minute, maar dit voel soos tien jaar.

Almal staar openlik toe Frank Wyatt by die kerk opdaag met ’n vrou aan sy arm – alhoewel hulle dalk staar omdat dit lyk of arme Betty Fowler se kop van haar lyf afgeruk en op iemand anders s’n geplak is. Hoe ook al, ons veroorsaak ’n beroering. Elke jong meisie, oujongnoui en mamma met ’n jong dogter in Deer Springs begin planne maak oor hoe hulle Frank se aandag kan trek nou dat hy uiteindelik besluit het om iemand die hof te maak. Maar Betty Botterbol van alle mense? Wie sou dit nou ooit kon dink?

Ons maak ’n belaglike paartjie. Selfs met my ongelooflike nuwe borsmaat lyk ek soos ’n kind langs Frank. Hy is lank en bruingebrand en gespied van jare se harde werk – en die punt van my krulkop kom nie eens tot by sy skouer nie. Ek moet vyf vinnige treë gee om by een van syne te hou; ek lyk seker soos ’n klein skoothondjie met my tong wat uithang omdat ek by hom probeer byhou.

Alhoewel Frank uiters beleefd en goed gemanierd is, tree hy nie een keer warm genoeg op om die roomys te laat smelt nie. Hy hou my glas vol

limonade en by die opdiensafel skep hy iets van alles bo-op my roomys, maar hy vra my nooit 'n enkele vraag in 'n poging om my beter te leer ken nie. Ek probeer baie hard om van hom te hou, maar die wete dat hy hoegenaamd glad nie in my belangstel nie, demp my pogings. Elke keer wanneer Frank na my kyk, sien hy my pa se dam.

Daar is driebeenresies vir paartjies en speletjies soos stoeldans, jukskei en kroket, maar Frank toon geen belangstelling in enige daarvan nie. Ek is nogal bly daaroor. Ek kan skaars loop, wat nog te sê hardloop, buk of strek. Waar ons oor die kerk se grasperk stap, gaan staan Frank kort-kort om met een van die ander mans te gesels en dwing my om 'n geselsie met hulle meisies aan te knoop. Dit is vir my baie harde werk om 'n hele middag lank vriendelik en aangenaam te wees. Ek is nie gewoond daaraan om sosiaal te verkeer nie. Kloekende hennies en boekies is gewoonlik my middaggeselskap.

Teen die tyd dat Frank my huis toe vat, is ek doodmoeg. Die oomblik toe Lydia die korset se toutjies losmaak, slaak ek 'n enorme sug van verligting. Dit is kortstondig.

“Het jy 'n goeie indruk gemaak?” wil Pa by die etenstafel weet. Dit is een van die min kere in my lewe dat my pa enige belangstelling in my toon.

“Ek het probeer, Pa.”

“Jy het probeër? Is dit ál? Ek verwag beslis meer van jou as om net te probeër indien hierdie samesmelting ooit gaan plaasvind. Besef jy nie 'n man soos Wyatt kan kies en keur tussen die vroue wanneer dit vir hom tyd word om 'n vrou te kry nie?”

Ek dink aan die mammas met jong dogters wat vir Frank Wyatt dopgehou het en staar moedeloos na my kapokaartappels. “Ja, Pa.”

“Moenie jou skouers so hang nie, Betty. Sit regop. Dis beter. Het hy jou gevra om weer saam met hom uit te gaan?”

“Hy het gesê hy sal vir die volgende ruk besig wees met die boord, maar hy het gewonder of ek die een of ander tyd 'n ent saam met hom sal gaan ry.”

“Goed. Goed. Ek hoop jy het hom aanmoediging gegee?”

“Ek het vir hom gesê dit sal vir my baie lekker wees om saam met hom te gaan.”

“Goed. Gee vir my die groenboontjies aan.”

Pa se gesondheid is maande lank al swak; daarom is ek bly dat hierdie ooreenkoms 'n bietjie lewe na hom terugbring. Ek weet egter vandag was net die proloog. 'n Hele reeks pynigende namiddae saam met Frank Wyatt sal waarskynlik volg totdat hy uiteindelik besluit of sy begeerte na my pa se grond die opoffering van 'n huwelik met my werd is. Tog sal ek volhard. Nellie Bly was onoorwinlik, en ek sal ook wees. My grootste besorgdheid is

om nie my pa teleur te stel nie.

Frank maak my daardie hele lente die hof, gewoonlik op Sondagmiddae wanneer werk nie toegelaat word nie. In Junie gaan ry ons 'n ent, woon 'n toespraak oor soberheid in die volgende dorp by en gaan ook na 'n spesiale praatjie oor sendingwerk by die kerk.

“Behoort jy aan ons vroue sendingvereniging, Betty?” vra hy op pad huis toe.

“Nee, ek – ”

“Jy moet aansluit.”

Ek sluit aan. Ek het ná die toespraak oor soberheid ook “die eed” afgelê. Ek sal op my kop staan en sente uitspoeg indien dit nodig is om hom te oortuig dat ek 'n goeie vrou vir hom sal wees.

Teen Julie weet die hele dorp ons is 'n “item”. Frank nooi my een Sondagoggend om by hom in die heilige Wyatt-bank in die kerk te kom sit. Pa is oorstelp van vreugde.

“Goed. Jy het die vis aan die hoek,” sê hy. “Nou moet jy hom inkatrol.”

Wat dít ook al beteken. Toe ek vir Lydia vra, sê sy dit beteken ek moet hom nooi om Sondag ná kerk by ons te kom eet sodat hy weet ek kan kook. Sy rig my getrou af in die vroulike kuns van hofmakery, maar dit lyk of ek die kursus gaan druipe. Frank maak my al twee maande lank die hof en hy het nog nie my hand vasgehou of my probeer soen nie. Die gaping tussen ons op die perdekarretjie se bankie is nog presies so groot soos toe hy my die eerste keer kom haal het.

Ek kan myself nie keer om Frank te vergelyk met die galante, verliefde helde van my gunsteling romans nie, en hy skiet elke keer tekort. Ek is nie besig om op hom verlief te raak nie. Om die waarheid te sê, hoe meer tyd ek saam met hom deurbring, hoe meer haat ek sy koue, oorweldigende manier van dinge doen. Te oordeel na my eie ervaring en die voorbeeld van my ouers, besluit ek maar dat liefde en romans net in boeke bestaan; nie in die regte lewe nie. Ek leer om die gevoel van vrees te ignoreer wat op die krop van my maag kom lê elke keer wanneer Frank by my huis aankom, en om die knaende ongemak opsy te skuif wat ek elke oomblik voel wat ek saam met hom deurbring.

Terwyl my verhouding met Frank stadig voortgaan, bereik Lydia haar eie mylpaal – sy gaan vir twee weke aaneen met dieselfde man uit. Ted Bartlett is 'n reisende verkoopsman wie se roete hom een keer 'n week op die trein na Deer Springs bring.

“Ek is verlief, Betsy! O, hierdie keer is ek régtig verlief,” roep Lydia uit.

Dit is die middel van Julie en ons lê dwarsoor die bed in ons bedompige

kamer terwyl ons hoop dat 'n briesie dalk by ons dakvensters sal in waai. Tot dusver is die enigste ding wat sy weg na binne gevind het 'n muskiet wat hom daarin verlekkeer om al om my kop te zoem.

“Vertel my alles,” sê ek en klap die muskiet mis, maar myself teen die wang.

“Ted is ongelooflik aantreklik. Hy het donker, golwende hare en 'n sagte snor wat my kielie wanneer hy my soen.”

“Het jy hom alreeds toegelaat om jou te soen?”

“Natuurlik, simpel. Wanneer ek by Ted is, wil ek nie hê hy moet my ooit ophou soen nie. Hy laat my so ... bemin voel. Ek kan nie beskryf hoe wonderlik dit is om sy sterk arms om my te voel terwyl hy my met soene oorlaai nie. Of hoe salig dit is om my kop op sy breë bors neer te lê en te hoor hoe sy hart onder my klop.”

Lydia het al meer as haar deel romanse gehad, maar ek het haar nog nooit voorheen so hartstogtelik hoor praat nie. Sy laat my voel asof ek iets mis. “Vertel my meer van hom,” smeek ek.

“Hy trek baie mooi aan, en hy dra net die jongste modes vir mans. Ek is seker hy is baie ryk. Hy kom van Chicago af. Dit is waar ons gaan bly nadat ons getroud is.”

“Het hy jou gevra om te trou?”

“Wel, nog nie, maar ek weet hy gaan dit binnekort doen. Hy is lief vir my, Betsy. Hy sê dit die hele tyd vir my. Dalk vra Frank jou ook om te trou en dan kan ons 'n dubbele bruilof hê. Sal dit nie wonderlik wees nie?”

“Eina!” Ek slaan weer vrugtelos na die muskiet nadat hy my aan die been gebyt het. “'n Dubbele bruilof sal wonderlik wees,” jok ek. “Ek sal nie naastenby so senuweeagtig wees as ons hierdie ding saam aanpak nie. Maar as ek eerlik moet wees, moet ek vir jou sê dat ek my nie as Frank se vrou kan indink nie.”

“Bedoel jy om sy bed met hom te deel?”

“Lydia!”

Sy lag vir my verleentheid. “Om 'n bed te deel is wonderlik as dit met iemand is wat jy werklik liefhet.”

“Hoe weet jy?” terg ek.

Sy stamp speels aan my. “Bly stil en slaap. Ek sal oor Ted droom, dan droom jy oor Frank.”

Terwyl ek wakker lê en muskietbyte krap, kan ek dit nie oor my hart kry om my suster te vertel dat enige droom oor Frank 'n nagmerrie sou wees nie.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Lydia had bragged for weeks about Ted Bartlett's wealth, so when a fancy carriage with a liveried driver and a matched team of horses pulled up to our farmhouse one hot July afternoon, I thought for sure they were delivering her beau. Father was working out in his orchard, and I was using my few moments of peace and freedom to sit out on the front porch and write. I planned on writing a romantic novel someday, so I was scribbling down all the romantic things Lydia had told me about Ted before I forgot them. And now here he was in person! I was about to tell the mustached gentleman who stepped down from the carriage that Lydia hadn't returned from work yet, but he spoke first.

"Good afternoon," he said, removing his straw boater hat and bowing slightly. I saw right away that Lydia had exaggerated his dark, wavy hair. If this was Ted, he'd be bald in another five years. "I'm inquiring about the sign I saw posted in the dry goods store in Deer Springs," the gentleman said. "You have a cottage for rent?"

"Oh! Yes! Yes, we do."

"My name is Walter Gibson," he said, handing me a beautifully engraved calling card. "I'm visiting from Chicago."

"Betty...Betty Fowler. Nice to meet you."

I was so awed by him and by his aura of fine breeding and wealth that I could barely speak. He had a slight build, well under Frank's height of six feet three inches, but was impeccably dressed in an ash-colored linen suit and waistcoat. A heavy gold pocket watch and chain dangled across the front. Even on this humid July afternoon he

seemed comfortably cool—not cold and stiff like Frank, but pleasurably relaxed. His hand rested on a walking cane with a silver handle that was carved like a dog’s head, and I noticed he had beautifully manicured nails.

He looked like a photograph from a magazine, and I suddenly realized that I looked like a fright! I wasn’t wearing my bust-perfecto corset to help squeeze me into a recognizably feminine shape, and I had wiggled out of my petticoats and dropped them into a sweaty heap on the porch. I had also unbuttoned the top two buttons of my calico shirtwaist in the heat and, worst of all, I was barefoot. With the humidity causing my hair to frizz out around my head, I must have resembled a savage peasant wench.

“So...may I see it?” He lifted one eyebrow and one side of his mustache in a half-smile. He struck me as a very kind man. I saw it in his eyes and heard it in his voice.

“Oh! The cottage! Oh, of course.”

I had heard all about the summer “cottages” of the very rich overlooking the big lake—they were more like palaces! So I was embarrassed to show him our tiny bungalow.

“It’s very plain...very rustic,” I sputtered. “And I’m afraid that the roof of your carriage will be too high to pass beneath the trees. I’d hate to see it get all scratched up or covered with dust. You would have to walk there.” I looked down at his perfectly polished, fine-leather shoes and winced. “Oh dear. They would get very dusty, too.”

He glanced down at his own feet, then at my bare ones, and smiled—a full-blown smile that revealed an endearing dimple in his right cheek. “Then perhaps I should join you and remove my shoes, as well?” It surprised me to realize that he wasn’t laughing at me but at himself.

“No, no. You’d better keep your shoes on. Listen, I’d hate to have you waste your time walking all the way out there for nothing. The

cottage is very rustic and quite isolated.”

“It sounds perfect. I’m looking for someplace secluded.”

“Thoreau’s *Walden Pond*?” I asked without thinking. He looked surprised, then delighted.

“Yes, exactly. How did you know?”

“I guess it was on my mind. I just finished rereading the book a few days ago.”

“I’ve read it several times myself,” he said. “My favorite line is: ‘Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance...but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board.’ ”

Our eyes met and I saw that with one poignant line from Thoreau, this stranger had given me a glimpse of himself. His eyes were as soft and gray as a foggy morning. When he suddenly asked, “What’s your favorite line?” I returned the gift without hesitation.

“ ‘If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.’ ”

He nodded thoughtfully, then smiled again. “So...will I get to see this cottage or did Thoreau already rent it before I arrived?”

“I’m sorry, of course,” I said, laughing. “It’s this way.”

I set off down the driveway and was nearly to the barn before I realized that he wasn’t keeping up with me. He was a young man, in his early thirties, but he walked with the slow, frail hesitancy of someone much older, leaning heavily on his cane. I thought it might embarrass him if I apologized, so I simply slowed down to keep pace with him.

“The easiest route is to take this shortcut through the orchard,” I explained. “There’s a dirt road but it’s overgrown with weeds. Father always planned on putting in a better road—a gravel one—but he

never did.”

“I’m glad.”

“You are?”

“I’m looking for something secluded, remember?”

“So you said.” I smiled. “All right, then, you asked for it! It’s just on the other side of these trees, down near the pond.”

“A pond? Really? It’s not called Walden Pond by any chance, is it?”

I found myself laughing again, and it amazed me. The only other person I’d ever felt this relaxed and content to be with was Lydia. The stranger’s gentle humor reminded me of my beloved school teacher, Mr. Herman.

“You may name the pond whatever you like,” I said, grinning up at him. “I don’t think anyone has ever given it a name. Now, I should warn you, the cabin is very rustic....”

“I think you already have.”

“Oh. Well, now you are doubly warned.” But as we came through the orchard and Mr. Gibson got his first glimpse of the little stone cottage, surrounded by trees and nestled beneath the hill, I saw it afresh through his eyes.

“But it’s lovely!” he said in surprise. A row of nodding pink hollyhocks by the front porch, with blossoms the size of saucers, waved at us in greeting.

“It was originally a log cabin,” I explained. “The stones were added to it later. No one really knows how old it is. It was here when my father bought the land, before the War Between the States. He built our farmhouse after his family outgrew it.”

I opened the front door and led Mr. Gibson inside. Father had made Lydia and me scrub the place thoroughly before she posted the sign in the store, so it was spotlessly clean. It smelled of pine logs and freshly ironed linen.

“What a charming place!”



“When my sister and I were children we used it for a playhouse,” I told him. “I’ve always loved it, too. I wish I could live here.”

It didn’t take long to show him through the tiny rooms, and I was sorry the tour ended so quickly. Something about the stranger made him nice to be around. He smelled good, too—like lemons.

“Yes, I think this will do quite nicely,” he said, gazing out at the pond from one of the front windows.

“You seriously want to rent it?” I asked in surprise. “But...but it’s so small, and...and...”

“And rustic?” He turned to me and his smile was contagious.

“Yes, it’s rustic...rude...backwoods...bucolic! Call it whatever you like, but there’s no proper kitchen or running water—only a pump outside. And it’s small...diminutive...lilliputian!” I have no idea what made me suddenly indulge in my love of words, but I could see that he found it amusing.

“I don’t mind. I’m seeking simplicity, remember?”

“But surely your wife—?”

“I’ll be living here alone. I’ve been ill for the past few months and the doctor recommended I try some country air.” His face was thin and a bit too pale, but if I hadn’t observed him walking I wouldn’t have thought him ill.

“I’m sorry to hear that you haven’t been well,” I said. “I hope the country air does the trick.”

“Yes, so do I. How much do you want per month?”

I told him Father’s price.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “If I could arrange for meals to be brought to me, too, I’ll pay twice that.”

“Twice!”

“Yes. Would I be able to move in today?”

“Today? All the way from Chicago?”

“No, I’m living in my family’s summer home over on the lake, but

to tell you the truth, I've grown weary of having servants and nurses constantly hovering around me. They mean well but they're beginning to make me feel like an invalid. I've been craving peace and quiet lately, and your 'rustic, lilliputian cottage' should do quite nicely."

"Then we have a deal, Mr. Gibson," I said, smiling. "You may move in whenever you like—and I promise not to 'hover.' "

His dimple reappeared as he grinned in return. "*Mr. Gibson* is my father. Please call me Walter."

"I'm Betsy." I had no idea why I asked him to use the name my sister always used instead of calling me Betty like my father and Frank Wyatt did. At the time, it just seemed natural. We walked back to his carriage, and after I explained to his driver how to find the dirt road that led to the cottage, they drove away.

Late in the afternoon, I heard the clatter of horses and wagon wheels rattling down the old dirt road to the cottage and I felt absurdly excited. After supper, I arranged generous portions of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and apple pie on a tray to take down to Walter Gibson.

"Why didn't you invite the man up here to eat?" Father asked when I explained that we now had a boarder. I hesitated, unable to picture Mr. Gibson eating dinner in our stark kitchen with my humorless father. Nor could I imagine him occupying the dining room chair Frank Wyatt always sat in for Sunday dinner. Walter seemed to belong in the cozy, pine-scented cottage by the pond, not up here.

"I'll invite him, but I'm sure he'll refuse," I said. "He came here looking for solitude. Besides, it's very difficult for him to walk."

"What's wrong with him?"

"I didn't ask. But here's his calling card," I said, fishing it from the pocket of my skirt.

"Gibson..." Father muttered, reading it aloud. "Chicago...You say he's rich? I wonder if he's kin to Howard Gibson, the industrialist."

“I don’t know. But he’s very nice.”

I headed out the back door to bring Walter his supper. This time I made certain I was properly combed, buttoned, and wearing shoes and a petticoat.

“Come on in,” Walter called after I’d knocked on the cottage door. I found him reading a book by the window, seated in a beautiful leather armchair the color of red wine. Trunks and boxes were piled everywhere.

“You seem to have an awful lot of belongings for someone seeking the simple life,” I teased.

“On the contrary,” he said with his wry, lopsided smile. “I brought only the bare necessities.” He removed his gold-rimmed spectacles and motioned toward one of the boxes. “Go ahead, open a couple of crates and have a look.”

Curious, I set the tray on the table beside his chair and peeked into one of the boxes—then another, and another. They were filled with books! I felt as breathless as I had the day I’d worn my new bust-perfecto corset.

“Oh...” I breathed. “Oh my!” Overcome with wonder, I picked up one book after another, scanning the gold-embossed titles, marveling at the rich leather bindings. Without thinking, I opened *A Tale of Two Cities* and lifted it to my nose to inhale. “I’m so sorry!” I cried when I caught myself.

Walter laughed with delight. “Don’t apologize. I feel the same way about books. As I said, for me, these are the bare necessities of life.”

“Along with food,” I said, pointing to the tray. “You should probably eat it before it gets cold.”

“Will you stay and keep me company while I do?” he asked.

“All right...If you’re sure you don’t mind me ‘hovering.’ ”

“Not at all,” he said, spreading a napkin on his lap, “ ‘Hovering’ is what people do when they ask how you’re feeling every two minutes.

If you start doing that I'm afraid I will have to boot you out. But in the meantime, I'd love to hear what other books you've read lately besides Thoreau's...and if you have any favorites."

"Favorites! I'd be here until breakfast time naming all my favorites!"

"I understand," he said, gesturing to all the boxes with his fork. "These are all my favorites. A better question might be, what qualities do you most enjoy in a book?"

I thought for a moment. "I like a story that takes me to places I've never visited before—one with characters that seem like old friends. But most of all, one that gives me something to think about long after I've finished reading it."

"Ah, then we are very much alike," he said, lifting his coffee cup in salute. "By the way, dinner is delicious. My compliments to the chef." "Thank you." I felt a surge of pleasure. I couldn't recall Frank Wyatt ever complimenting my cooking.

"Are you really the chef? Your husband is a fortunate man."

"I'm not married. I live with my father and younger sister. You probably met Lydia at the dry goods store where the sign was posted."

"Did I? I can't recall."

For some reason, that pleased me more than anything else he'd said. For the next hour, Walter and I talked about everything from American poets to the Greek classics while he slowly savored his dinner. I was unaware of how much time had passed until I noticed that the room had grown dark enough to need lamps.

"I should go!" I said, jumping to my feet. "If I don't lock up Father's chickens before dark, the foxes will be celebrating Thanksgiving."

"I'm sorry if I've kept you—"

"Oh, don't be. I'm certainly not. Shall I light the lamps for you before I go?"

"Yes, please. And then have a look through those boxes again and

see if there's anything you'd like to take along to read."

"Are you serious? You would really let me borrow one of your books?"

"Borrow as many as you'd like, Betsy—but there is one condition. You must sit down and tell me your opinion of each one when you return it."

I floated back to the house carrying *Nicholas Nickelby*. For the next two weeks, bringing Walter his meals was the highlight of my day. I would have gladly walked down to the cottage a dozen times a day if I hadn't feared making a pest of myself. For a man seeking solitude he certainly loved to converse. And I thoroughly enjoyed conversing with him. We didn't always agree on who the best authors were and which plots were too melodramatic or too contrived, but the lively debates we had were great fun.

On the first Sunday in August, Frank Wyatt drove me home from church and stayed for dinner as usual. I paid little attention to the conversation as I bided my time, waiting for Frank to go home so I could bring Walter his lunch and finish discussing Walt Whitman's poetry with him. Suddenly Lydia gave me a hard kick beneath the table. I returned from my reverie in time to hear Frank say, "Then with your permission, Mr. Fowler, Betty and I will be married as soon as the harvest is finished."

I nearly shouted, "No!"—until I saw the broad grin on my father's face.

"Just remember, young man," he said, trying to look stern, "you promised to call our merger Wyatt & Fowler Orchards."

"Yes, sir. I remember." They shook hands. I heard a terrible rushing sound in my ears and for a moment I thought I might faint. Suddenly Lydia was beside me, hugging me.

"Smile, you ninny!" she whispered urgently in my ear. "For pete's sake, smile! You're engaged!"

I was engaged—without a single gesture or token of affection passing between Frank and myself. The smile I quickly manufactured felt more like a grimace of pain.

I heard myself agree to an after-dinner tour of Wyatt Orchards and the house that would soon be mine. I heard my father declining to come along. I heard my sister insisting that I go ahead and leave the dishes to her. But the worst moment came when Lydia took the plate I had fixed for Walter out of the warming oven and disappeared through the back door to take it to him. If I could have stopped her from going, stopped Walter Gibson from ever meeting my beautiful younger sister, I would have gladly sacrificed everything I owned. But as Frank Wyatt escorted me out the front door to his carriage, there wasn't a thing in the world I could do.

Frank did all the talking as he drove his carriage around his property. I listened in numb silence to his grand plans for planting a new section with peaches and experimenting with cherry trees next spring, but all I could think about was Walter's smile and the faint dimple that would crease his cheek when Lydia walked through his door.

I followed Frank inside the Wyatt house for the first time in my life—that beautiful white house on the hill with the dark green shutters and the graceful front porch, the house that would soon be mine—and I found it overburdened with other people's stuff to the point of suffocation. I longed to clear every shelf and dresser and sideboard of all its knickknacks and replace them with books—leather-bound books with gold-embossed titles and sweet-smelling pages. I imagined my sister laughing at something Walter said and lightly touching his arm the way she'd shown me, and I longed to sink down in the middle of Frank's parlor and weep.

That afternoon I saw a clear picture of what my life with Frank Wyatt would be like—everything would revolve around Frank as if he

were the great sun in the center of the universe, and I would have to fit myself into his solar system someplace, like all the other possessions in his overstuffed parlor. Even so, I might have been able to tolerate that existence if Walter Gibson hadn't come into my life to talk with me and listen to me and laugh with me and to show me what I was going to miss.

I followed Frank out through the kitchen door in blind misery, walking across the backyard, past the barn, and through the apple orchard. We stopped at the top of the hill overlooking my father's property. The pond and the little stone cottage lay below us, and I wondered if Lydia was still inside talking with Walter, laughing together while he ate his meal.

I turned to the man I was now engaged to marry and said, "I think the pond needs a name, don't you Frank? I think we should name it Walden Pond."

"What? Where did that ridiculous name come from?" He had a way of looking directly at people when he was irritated with them that always made them squirm. I felt like a bug at the mercy of a bully, as though his eyes had me pinned to a piece of cardboard.

"You know, Frank, from the book *Walden Pond* by Henry David Thoreau? He was a disciple of Emerson? It's a famous book."

"I'm not interested."

"Not interested in naming the pond or in Thoreau's book?"

"Either one. Once the pond becomes part of Wyatt Orchards it will probably be called Wyatt's Pond. And as far as books are concerned, they're a waste of valuable time."

My stomach made a slow, sickening turn. "I can understand not having time to read during the summer or at harvest time, but surely during the long winter months—"

"All books, except for the Bible, are frivolous—and most of them are of the devil."

“You’re joking. Books are of the *devil*?”

He wasn’t joking.

“The Bible calls Satan ‘the father of lies’ and novels are nothing but lies, created from man’s own evil imagination. I won’t allow them in my house.”

I battled my growing panic. “What about *Pilgrim’s Progress* and—”

“A rare exception. Listen, Betty, we need to choose a date.”

I stared at him blankly.

“For the wedding,” he explained. “Would the first Saturday in October give you enough time to prepare?”

Eternity wouldn’t be enough time to prepare for a life without books—nevermind a lifetime with Frank Wyatt. Yet in two short months I would vow to spend my life with this man, to honor him and obey him. I forced myself to remember Father’s joy at the dinner table and said, “That date will be fine with me.”

“Good. I’ll drive you home now.”

“I’d much rather walk, Frank,” I said quickly. “And thanks for the tour. Good-bye.”

I set off the down the hill at a brisk pace, praying that he wouldn’t follow. My tears had already begun to fall, and like the stones rolling down the hill beneath my stumbling feet, I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to stop them.

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Walter was sitting outside in his Adirondack chair—another “necessity” he had brought from home—when I arrived with his supper tray that night. He looked up from his book when he heard me approach and smiled.

“There you are, Betsy. I missed you at lunch today.”

I collapsed to the ground at his feet and wept, grief and relief all tangled together like a skein of yarn. Walter caught the tray just in



time and set it on the grass. “Betsy...what’s wrong?” he asked gently.

I drew several shaky breaths. “The man who’s been courting me...asked to marry me.”

“I see. Those don’t exactly look like tears of joy. Was he upset when you refused him, then?”

“I didn’t refuse. I couldn’t refuse. My father—” I couldn’t finish. Walter pressed his handkerchief into my hand. I lifted it to my face to dry my tears, and when I smelled Walter’s clean, lemony scent I cried harder still.

“I’m so sorry, Betsy.” He said softly. “I wish I knew what to say.”

“Thanks. I’ll be all right.” I struggled to pull myself together. “I just need time to get used to the idea.”

“Do you think love might grow, given time?” he asked.

“I’m sure it will,” I lied. But I wondered how I could possibly learn to love a man who hated books. I drew another shaky breath. “Did you love your wife when you first married her?”

He looked at me for a long moment. “I’m not married, Betsy. I’m engaged to be, but the wedding has been indefinitely postponed until I recover my health.”

“I’m surprised your fiancée doesn’t want to be near you so she can take care of you and help you recuperate faster.”

Walter sighed. “Maybe that’s the way it works in novels, but seldom in real life. My marriage will be just another one of my father’s many business arrangements—a socially significant and financially useful match for his only son and heir. Neither the young woman nor I would dare to argue with Howard Knowles Gibson. I’ve met her, of course, but we don’t know each other very well. My illness has made it difficult to have a proper courtship.”

I dared to look up at him for the first time. “Then I’m not the only one being married against my will?”

“It’s a small consolation I’m sure, but no, you’re not the only one. In

the social circles I was born into, most marriages are matters of convenience. Love and romance are seldom involved.”

I plucked idly at some blades of grass at his feet, then tossed them away on the wind. “I can learn to live without love I suppose, but I don’t know how I will ever live without books. The man I’m going to marry hates them. He says he won’t allow any book in his house except the Bible...and maybe *Pilgrim’s Progress*.” I had to smile, in spite of my tears, at the sheer absurdity of Frank’s intolerance. Walter smiled in return.

“*Pilgrim’s Progress*, eh? I’m quite certain that my fiancée has never even heard of it.”

We laughed then, and I felt laughter’s healing power salving my wounds. I couldn’t recall ever laughing with Frank Wyatt, and it occurred to me that a lifetime without laughter might be even worse than a lifetime without books.

Suddenly, without knowing how or when it had happened, I realized that Walter was holding my hand between his own to comfort me. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

“Do you remember the first day we met, Betsy? Remember the line you quoted from Thoreau about pursuing your dreams? I just realized something—I’ve never asked you what those dreams were.”

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

He considered it for a minute, then grinned. “No, I can’t promise. Suppose you told me you wanted to be a Hindu snake charmer or the captain of a whaling ship—I’m sorry, but I’d have to laugh.”

I knew that my dreams were very safe with Walter. I smiled in return and told him. “I want to be a writer. That’s what I was doing, in fact, the day we met. I used to dream of being a stunt reporter like Nellie Bly.”

“I’ve met her.”

“You haven’t!”

“Yes, Nellie Bly sat across from me at a dinner once in New York. My father is a good friend of her boss, Joseph Pulitzer.”

“What’s she like?”

“Actually...very much like you,” he said quietly. “Except you’re easier to talk to, more thoughtful and articulate.” I looked away. He tugged on my hand until I looked back. “Seriously, Betsy. I would be glad to talk to Mr. Pulitzer on your behalf if you want me to. I could help you find an apartment in New York.”

I was tempted—oh, so tempted—but I knew that it was impossible. “I can’t,” I said sorrowfully. “My father has his heart set on this marriage.”

Walter closed his eyes for a moment and nodded. “I understand. I really do. My father is Howard Knowles Gibson, remember?”

“Yes.” I waited for our eyes to meet, then asked, “What are your dreams, Walter?”

He smiled his lopsided grin. “To be a Hindu snake charmer and the captain of a whaling ship.” Eventually his smile faded and he shook his head. “I really don’t know. For as far back as I can recall my father has always told me what I would be. I’m his heir, I’ll take over for him one day...and I’ve always struggled to face up to that. It’s not just the work, it’s everything that goes along with it—the extravagant lifestyle, the whole social scene, the politicking and dirty-dealing. I may not know what I want, but I know what I don’t want.” He sighed and shook his head again.

“After I finished college I begged my father for two months off to travel a bit before taking my place in the company. He reluctantly agreed—and I ran off for three years. I explored the world. The jungles of Borneo, the Ivory Coast of Africa, the rain forests of Brazil...I even panned for gold in Alaska. I had to pack a lifetime of living into a very short time, you see.”

“That’s all the time I have, too—two months.”

He released my hand and paged through the book he had been reading when I arrived, searching for something. I saw the title—*Walden Pond*.

“Listen to this, Betsy. Thoreau writes, ‘Let everyone mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made. Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.’ ”

I watched a wild mallard fishing on the pond in the fading light, his head dipping down suddenly, his tail feathers pointing to the darkening sky. “I don’t think either one of us can even hear our own music anymore,” I said at last.

“No, I suppose not,” Walter said with a sigh. “But there is one choice we are both still free to make. You will have children someday, Betsy, and so will I. We can allow them to step to the beat of their own drummer.”

I wrote Walter’s words in my notebook that night so I would always remember them. Then I closed it and tucked it deep inside my dresser drawer. I was quite sure they were the last words I would ever write.

## ~ Hoofstuk sewe ~

Lydia spog weke lank oor Ted Bartlett se rykdom. Toe 'n spoggerige perdekarretjie met 'n drywer in livrei en 'n bypassende span perde dus een warm middag in Julie voor ons plaashuis tot stilstand kom, dink ek hulle bring seker haar kêrel. Pa is iewers in die boord besig en ek gebruik my paar oomblikke van vrede en vryheid om op die voorstoep te sit en skryf. Ek is van plan om eendag 'n roman te skryf; daarom skryf ek al die romantiese goed neer wat Lydia my van Ted vertel voordat ek dit vergeet. En nou is hy self hier. Ek wil net vir die man met die snor wat uit die karretjie klim, sê dat Lydia nog nie van die werk af terug is nie, maar hy praat eerste.

“Goeiemiddag,” sê hy, haal sy strooihoed van sy kop af en buig liggies. Ek sien dadelik Lydia het die beskrywing van sy donker krulhare oordryf. As dit Ted is, sal hy oor vyf jaar bles wees. “Ek kom doen navraag oor die advertensie wat ek in die winkel in Deer Springs gesien het. Ek verstaan julle het 'n kothuis wat julle wil verhuur.”

“O! Ja, ja ons het.”

“My naam is Walter Gibson,” sê hy en gee vir my 'n pragtig gegraveerde visitekaartjie aan. “Ek is op besoek van Chicago.”

“Betty ... Betty Fowler. Dis gaaf om jou te ontmoet.”

Ek is so stomgeslaan deur hom en deur sy aura van welgemanierdheid en rykdom dat ek skaars kan praat. Hy is tingerig gebou, ver onder Frank se lengte van 1,9 meter, maar hy is stylvol geklee in 'n liggrys linnepak en onderbaadjie. 'n Swaar goue sakhorlosie aan 'n ketting hang teen sy bors. Selfs op hierdie bedompige dag in Julie lyk hy gemaklik en koel; nie koud en styf soos Frank nie, maar aangenaam ontspanne. Sy hand rus op 'n kerie met 'n silwer handvatsel wat soos 'n hond se kop lyk en ek sien sy naels is ook netjies versorg.

Hy lyk soos 'n foto uit 'n tydskrif en ek besef skielik dat ek self baie sleg lyk. Ek het nie my korset aan wat help om my lyf in 'n aanvaarbare vroulike vorm te verander nie en ek het my onderrok uitgetrek en dit lê in 'n natgeswete hopie op die stoep. Ek het ook die boonste twee knope van my katoenhempstrok in die hitte losgemaak en, die ergste van alles, ek is kaalvoet. Met die humiditeit wat my hare soos 'n bos om my kop laat staan, lyk ek seker soos 'n regte robbedoe van 'n boeremeisie.

“So ... Kan ek dit sien?” Hy lig sy een wenkbrou en die een kant van sy

snor in 'n halwe glimlag. Hy lyk vir my na 'n baie vriendelike man. Ek sien dit in sy oë en hoor dit in sy stem.

“O ja! Die kothuis. Natuurlik.”

Ek het al dikwels gehoor van die baie ryk mense se “somerkothuise” wat oor 'n groot meer uitkyk – dit klink meer na paleise. Ek voel dus verleë om vir hom ons klein rondaweltjie te wys.

“Dit is baie ... eenvoudig,” stotter ek. “Ek is ook bevrees jou karretjie se dak is te hoog om onderdeur die bome te gaan. Ek wil nie hê dit moet gekrap en vol stof word nie. Jy sal daarheen moet stap.” Ek kyk na sy blink gepoleerde leerskoene en krimp innerlik ineen. “O aarde. Jou skoene gaan ook vuil word.”

Hy kyk na sy eie voete, dan na my kaal voete en glimlag – 'n breë glimlag wat 'n kuiltjie in sy regterwang ontbloom. “Dan moet ek dalk maar soos jy maak en my skoene ook uittrek.” Ek besef verbaas hy lag nie vir my nie, maar vir homself.

“Nee, nee. Jy moet eerder jou skoene aanhou. Luister, ek wil nie hê jy moet jou tyd mors deur verniet al die pad daarheen te loop nie. Die kothuis is baie eenvoudig en heeltemal eenkant.”

“Dit klink perfek. Ek soek na 'n afgesonderde plek.”

“Thoreau se *Walden Pond*?” vra ek sonder om te dink. Hy lyk eers verbaas, dan in sy skik.

“Ja, presies. Hoe het jy geweet?”

“Ek het seker maar onbewustelik daaraan gedink. Ek het die boek 'n paar dae gelede klaar geles.”

“Ek het dit self al 'n hele paar keer geles,” sê hy. “My gunsteling reël is: ‘Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance ... but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board.’”

Ons oë ontmoet en ek sien dat hierdie vreemdeling my met een aangrypende reël van Thoreau iets van homself gewys het. Sy oë is so sag en grys soos 'n mistige oggend. Toe hy skielik vra: “Wat is jou gunsteling reël?” gee ek sonder aarseling vir hom 'n geskenk van my eie.

“‘If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.’”

Hy knik ingedagte en glimlag dan weer. “So ... Kan ek na hierdie kothuis gaan kyk of het Thoreau dit reeds gehuur voordat ek hier aangekom het?”

“Ek is jammer, natuurlik,” sê ek laggend. “Dis hierdie kant toe.” Ek begin in die laning afstap en is al byna by die skuur toe ek besef hy hou nie by nie.

Hy is 'n jong man, vroeg in sy dertigs, maar hy loop met die stadige, onstandvastige huiwering van 'n baie ouer persoon terwyl hy swaar op sy kierie leun. Ek besluit hy kan dalk verleë voel indien ek om verskoning vra; dus stap ek net stadiger sodat hy kan byhou.

“Die maklikste roete is om hierdie kortpad deur die boord te vat,” verduidelik ek. “Daar is 'n grondpad, maar dit is oortrek van die onkruid. Pa was nog altyd van plan om 'n beter pad te bou – 'n gruispad – maar hy het dit nog nooit gedoen nie.”

“Ek is bly.”

“Regtig?”

“Ek is mos op soek na 'n afgesonderde plek, of hoe?”

“Dis wat jy gesê het, ja.” Ek glimlag. “Nou goed dan, jy het daarvoor gevra. Dit is net anderkant daardie bome, reg by die dam.”

“'n Dam? Regtig? Julle noem dit nie dalk die Walden-dam nie?”

Ek lag weer, en dit verbaas my. Die enigste ander persoon by wie ek ooit so ontspanne en tevrede voel, is Lydia. Die vreemdeling se sagte humor herinner my aan my geliefde onderwyser, meneer Herman.

“Jy kan die dam noem net wat jy wil,” sê ek en glimlag vir hom. “Ek dink nie iemand het dit al ooit 'n naam gegee nie. Ek moet jou egter waarsku, die kothuis is baie eenvoudig ...”

“Ek dink jy het my reeds gewaarsku.”

“Wel, nou het jy 'n dubbele waarskuwing gekry.” Toe ons egter by die boord uitkom en meneer Gibson die klein klipkothuis vir die eerste keer sien, aan die voet van die heuwel en deur bome omring, sien ek dit opnuut deur sy oë.

“Sjoe, maar dit is mooi!” sê hy verbaas. 'n Ry knikkende pienk stokrose wat by die voorstoep groei en blomme so groot soos pierings het, waai vir ons.

“Dit was oorspronklik 'n houthuis,” verduidelik ek. “Die klippe is later bygevoeg. Niemand weet regtig hoe oud dit is nie. Dit was hier toe my pa die grond gekoop het, voor die burgeroorlog. Hy het ons plaashuis gebou toe ons gesin te groot geword het vir die kothuis.”

Ek maak die voordeur oop en lei meneer Gibson na binne. Pa het gesorg dat ek en Lydia die plek van bo tot onder skrop voordat sy die advertensie in die winkel opgesit het. Die kothuis is dus silwerskoon. Dit ruik na dennehout en vars gestrykte linne.

“Wat 'n bekoorlike plek!”

“Toe ek en my suster kinders was, het ons hier huis-huis gespeel,” sê ek vir hom. “Ek is nog altyd mal oor die plek. Ek wens ek kon hier bly.”

Dit vat nie lank om vir hom al die klein vertrekke te wys nie en ek is jammer omdat die toer deur die kothuis so gou verby is. Iets omtrent die vreemdeling maak dit lekker om in sy geselskap te wees. Hy ruik ook lekker, soos suurlemoene.

“Ja, ek dink dit is perfek,” sê hy en staar by een van die voorste vensters uit na die dam.

“Wil jy dit regtig huur?” vra ek verbaas. “Maar ... maar dis so klein en ... en ...”

“En eenvoudig?” Hy draai na my toe en sy glimlag is aansteeklik.

“Ja, dis eenvoudig ... primitief ... agterlik ... landelik. Noem dit wat jy wil, maar daar is nie ’n behoorlike kombuis of lopende water nie – net ’n pomp aan die buitekant. En dit is klein ... dwergagtig.” Ek het geen idee wat my skielik na my liefde vir woorde laat gryp nie, maar ek kan sien dat hy dit amusant vind.

“Ek gee nie om nie. Ek is op soek na eenvoud.”

“Maar jou vrou sal sekerlik – ?”

“Ek sal alleen hier bly. Ek was die afgelope paar maande baie siek en die dokter het aanbeveel dat ek in die platteland moet kom bly vir vars lug.” Sy gesig is maer en ’n bietjie te bleek, maar as ek hom nie sien stap het nie, sou ek glad nie gedink het hy is siek nie.

“Ek is jammer om te hoor dat jy siek was,” sê ek. “Ek hoop die plattelandse lug doen die ding.”

“Ja, ek ook. Hoeveel wil jy per maand hê?”

Ek sê vir hom wat Pa se prys is.

“Ek sê jou wat,” sê hy. “As ek kan reël dat ek etes ook kry, sal ek dubbel dié bedrag betaal.”

“Dubbel!”

“Ja. Sal ek vandag kan intrek?”

“Vandag? Al die pad van Chicago af?”

“Nee, ek bly tans in my familie se somerhuis by die meer. Die waarheid is, ek is moeg daarvoor dat verpleegsters en bediendes die hele tyd om my kloek. Hulle bedoel dit goed, maar hulle laat my nou al soos ’n invalide voel. Ek smag die afgelope ruk na vrede en stilte, en jou ‘eenvoudige, dwergagtige kothuis’ is presies waarna ek soek.”

“Dan het ons ’n ooreenkoms, meneer Gibson,” sê ek glimlaggend. “Jy kan intrek net wanneer jy wil, en ek belowe om nie te ‘kloek’ nie.”

Sy kuiltjie verskyn weer toe hy vir my ook glimlag. “*Meneer Gibson* is my pa. Noem my asseblief Walter.”

“Ek is Betsy.” Ek het geen idee hoekom ek vir hom die naam gee wat my



suster altyd gebruik in plaas van te vra dat hy my Betty noem, soos my pa en Frank Wyatt nie. Op daardie tydstip voel dit net natuurlik. Ons stap terug na sy perdekarretjie toe en nadat ek vir sy bestuurder verduidelik het hoe om die grondpad te kry wat na die kothuis lei, ry hulle weg.

Later die middag hoor ek die gerammel van perde en wawiele wat in die ou grondpad af na die kothuis ry en ek voel vreemd opgewonde. Ná aandete skep ek groot porsies gebraaide hoender, kapokaartappel en appeltert op, sit dit op 'n skinkbord en maak gereed om dit vir Walter Gibson te vat.

“Hoekom nou jy nie die man om sommer hier te kom eet nie?” vra Pa toe ek verduidelik dat ons nou 'n loseerder het. Ek huiwer. Ek kan my nie indink dat meneer Gibson hier in ons star kombuis saam met my humorlose pa moet eet nie. Ek kan my ook nie indink dat hy op die stoel moet sit waarop Frank Wyatt elke Sondagmiddag sit nie. Dit voel of Walter in die knus kothuis by die dam hoort wat na dennehout ruik, nie hier bo nie.

“Ek sal hom nou, maar ek is seker hy sal weier,” sê ek. “Hy het hiernatoe gekom omdat hy alleen wil wees. Hy loop ook in elk geval moeilik.”

“Wat is fout met hom?”

“Ek het nie gevra nie, maar hier is sy visitekaartjie,” sê ek en haal dit uit my rompsak uit.

“Gibson,” mompel Pa toe hy hardop lees. “Chicago ... Jy sê hy is ryk? Ek wonder of hy familie is van Howard Gibson, die industrialis.”

“Ek weet nie, maar hy is baie aangenaam.”

Ek gaan by die agterdeur uit om vir Walter sy aandete te vat. Hierdie keer maak ek seker dat my hare netjies geborsel is, my knope toe is en ek skoene en my onderrok aanhet.

“Kom gerus in,” roep Walter nadat ek aan die kothuis se deur geklop het. Ek kry hom waar hy by die venster 'n boek sit en lees, en dit op 'n pragtige leerstoel die kleur van rooiwyn. Die hele plek staan vol kiste en bokse.

“Dit lyk of jy vreeslik baie besittings het vir iemand wat na 'n lewe van eenvoud streef,” terg ek hom.

“Inteendeel,” sê hy met sy skewe glimlag. “Ek het net die basiese noodsaaklikhede gebring.” Hy haal sy goueraambril af en beduie na een van die bokse. “Maak gerus 'n paar daarvan oop en kyk wat binne-in is.”

Uit pure nuuskierigheid sit ek die skinkbord op die tafel langs sy stoel neer en loer in een van die bokse – dan in nog een, en nog een. Dit is vol boeke. Ek voel net so uitasem soos die dag toe ek daardie splinternuwe stywe korset aangehad het.

“O ... ” sê ek stomgeslaan. “O genade!” Oorkom deur verwondering tel ek die een boek ná die ander op, lees die titels in goue reliëfdruk, verwonder my

aan die luukse leergebinde boeke. Sonder om te dink maak ek *A Tale of Two Cities* oop en lig dit na my neus sodat ek die geur daarvan kan inasem. “Ek is so jammer,” sê ek toe ek besef wat ek doen.

Walter lag uitbundig. “Moenie verskoning maak nie. Ek voel dieselfde oor boeke. Soos ek gesê het, is die inhoud van hierdie bokse die basiese noodsaaklikhede van die lewe.”

“Saam met kos,” sê ek en wys na die skinkbord. “Jy moet dit maar eet voordat dit koud word.”

“Sal jy bly en my geselskap hou terwyl ek eet?” vra hy.

“Nou goed ... as jy seker is dit laat jou nie voel of ek ‘kloek’ nie.”

“Glad nie,” sê hy en sprei sy servet op sy skoot oop. “‘Kloek’ is wat mense doen wanneer hulle elke twee minute vir jou vra hoe jy voel. As jy dit gaan begin doen, sal ek nie anders kan as om jou uit te skop nie. Intussen wil ek graag hoor watter ander boeke jy onlangs gelees het buiten Thoreau s’n ... en of jy enige gunsteling het.”

“Gunsteling! Ek sal nog met ontbyt hier wees as ek al my gunsteling moet opnoem.”

“Ek verstaan,” sê hy en wys met sy vurk na al die bokse. “Dit is al my gunsteling. ’n Beter vraag is dalk: Van watter eienskappe hou jy die meeste in ’n boek?”

Ek dink vir ’n oomblik na. “Ek hou van ’n storie wat my na plekke toe vat waar ek nog nooit voorheen was nie – een met karakters wat soos ou vriende voel. Bo alles hou ek egter van ’n boek wat my iets gee om oor te dink lank nadat ek dit klaar gelees het.”

“Aha, dan is ek en jy baie dieselfde,” sê hy en lig sy koffiebeker in ’n saluut. “Terloops, die kos is heerlik. My komplimente aan die kok.”

“Dankie.” Ek voel sommer in my skik met myself. Ek kan nie onthou of Frank Wyatt my al ooit vir my kookvernuf gekomplimenteer het nie.

“Is jy regtig die kok? Jou eggenoot is ’n baie gelukkige man.”

“Ek is nie getroud nie. Ek bly saam met my pa en jonger suster. Jy het waarskynlik vir Lydia by die algemene handelaar ontmoet waar die advertensie op was.”

“Het ek? Ek kan nie onthou nie.”

Om die een of ander rede maak dit my gelukkiger as enigiets anders wat hy tot dusver gesê het. Vir die volgende uur gesels ek en Walter oor alles van Amerikaanse digters tot die Griekse klassieke werke terwyl hy sy aandete stadig geniet. Ek besef nie hoeveel tyd reeds verby is totdat ek sien die vertrek is al donker genoeg om ’n lamp aan te steek nie.

“Ek moet gaan,” sê ek en spring vinnig op. “As ek Pa se hoenders nie voor

donker toemaak nie, sal die jakkalse dink dis Kersfees.”

“Ek is jammer ek het jou opgehou met – ”

“O nee, moenie wees nie. Ek is beslis nie. Moet ek vir jou die lampe aansteek voordat ek gaan?”

“Ja, asseblief. Dan kan jy gerus weer deur daardie bokse kyk en besluit of daar iets is wat jy wil saamvat om te lees.”

“Is jy ernstig? Sal jy regtig dat ek een van jou boeke leen?”

“Jy kan leen soveel jy wil, Betsy, maar daar is een voorwaarde. Met elkeen wat jy terugbring, moet jy eers sit en vir my sê wat jy daarvan dink.”

Ek sweef terug huis toe met *Nicholas Nickleby* in my hande. Vir die volgende twee weke is my hoogtepunt van elke dag wanneer ek Walter se etes vir hom moet vat. Ek sal met graagte elke dag ’n dosyn keer kothuis toe loop as ek nie so bang was om ’n oorlas van myself te maak nie. Vir ’n man wat rustigheid en stilte kom soek het, hou hy verseker baie daarvan om te gesels. Ek geniet sy geselskap ook net so baie. Ons stem nie altyd saam oor wie die beste skrywers is en watter storielyn te dramaties of te vergesog is nie, maar die lewendige debatte wat ons daaroor het, is groot pret.

Op die eerste Sondag in Augustus vat Frank Wyatt my ná kerk huis toe en bly soos gewoonlik vir ete. Ek steur my nie regtig aan die gesprek nie, maar wag my tyd af totdat Frank huis toe gaan en ek vir Walter sy middagete kan vat sodat ons ons gesprek oor Walt Whitman se poësie kan voortsit. Lydia skop my skielik hard onder die tafel. Ek kom net betyds uit my mymering om Frank te hoor sê: “Met u toestemming, meneer Fowler, sal ek en Betty dan trou sodra die oes afgehandel is.”

Ek skree byna: “Nee!” – totdat ek die breë glimlag op my pa se gesig sien.

“Onthou net, jong man,” sê hy en probeer streng lyk, “jy belowe om ons samesmelting Wyatt & Fowler-boorde te noem.”

“Ja, Meneer. Ek onthou.” Hulle skud hand. Ek hoor ’n aaklige suigsgeluid in my ore en dink vir ’n oomblik ek gaan flou word. Dan is Lydia skielik langs my en gee my ’n stywe druk.

“Glimlag, jou domkop,” fluister sy in my oor. “Glimlag om hemelsnaam. Jy is verloof.”

Ek is verloof – sonder dat daar ’n enkele gebaar of teken van liefde of toegeneentheid tussen my en Frank was. Die glimlag waarmee ek vinnig vorendag kom, voel meer na ’n pyntrek.

Ek hoor hoe ek instem om ná ete vir ’n toer te gaan deur Wyatt-boorde en die huis wat binnekort myne sal wees. Ek hoor hoe my pa die uitnodiging om saam te kom van die hand wys. Ek hoor hoe my suster daarop aandring dat ek gaan en die skottelgoed vir haar los. Die ergste oomblik is egter toe Lydia die

bord kos wat ek vir Walter ingeskep het uit die louoond haal en by die agterdeur uit verdwyn om dit vir hom te vat. As ek haar kon keer, as ek enigsins kon verhoed dat Walter Gibson my beeldskone jonger suster ontmoet, sou ek met graagte elke liewe ding prysgee wat ek besit. Terwyl Frank Wyatt my egter by die voordeur uit en na sy perdekarretjie lei, is daar nie 'n enkele ding wat ek daaraan kan doen nie.

Frank praat die hele tyd terwyl ons met die perdekarretjie oor sy eiendom ry. Ek luister met 'n halwe oor na sy planne om 'n nuwe perskeboord aan te plant en om ook die volgende lente met kersies te eksperimenteer, maar al waaraan ek kan dink, is Walter se glimlag en die kuiltjie wat in sy wang sal verskyn wanneer Lydia by sy deur instap.

Ek volg Frank vir die eerste keer in my lewe by die Wyatt-huis in – daardie pragtige wit huis op die heuwel met die donkergroen luike en die bekoorlike voorstoep; die huis wat binnekort myne sou word – en ek vind dit oorvol met ander mense se goed tot op die punt dat ek benoud begin voel. Ek smag daarna om elke rak en kas en buffet van hulle tierlantyntjies te bevry en dit met boeke te vervang – leergebinde boeke met titels in goue reliëfletters en bladsye wat heerlik soet ruik. Ek hoor in my gedagtes hoe my suster vir iets lag wat Walter gesê het en dat sy sag aan sy arm raak, soos sy my gewys het, en ek voel lus om in die middel van Frank se voorkamer te gaan sit en huil.

Daardie middag kry ek 'n duidelike prentjie van hoe my lewe saam met Frank Wyatt sal wees – alles sal om Frank draai, asof hy die groot son in die middel van die heelal is, en ek sal myself iewers in sy sonnestelsel moet inpas, soos al die besittings in hierdie oorvol voorkamer. Ek sou so 'n bestaan kon verduur het as Walter Gibson nie skielik in my lewe gekom en met my gesels en na my geluister en saam met my gelag en vir my gewys het wat ek alles gaan mis nie.

Ek volg Frank in totale miserabelheid by die agterdeur uit, stap oor die agterplaas, verby die skuur en deur die appelboord. Ons gaan staan bo-op die heuwel wat oor my pa se eiendom uitkyk. Die dam en die klein kliphuisie lê onder ons en ek wonder of Lydia nog daarbinne is, of sy met Walter gesels, saam met hom lag terwyl hy sy kos eet.

Ek draai na die man toe aan wie ek nou verloof is en met wie ek binnekort gaan trou en sê: “Ek dink die dam moet 'n naam kry, of hoe, Frank? Ek dink ons moet dit Walden-dam noem.”

“Wat? Waar kom jy aan dié belaglike naam?” Hy het die manier om direk na mense te kyk wanneer hy geïrriteerd is en dit laat hulle altyd ineenkrimp. Ek voel soos 'n klein goggatjie wat aan 'n boelie se genade oorgelaat is en dit voel of sy oë my aan 'n stukkie karton vaspen.

“Jy weet mos, Frank, dit kom uit die boek *Walden Pond* deur Henry David Thoreau. Hy was een van Emerson se dissipels. Dit is ’n bekende boek.”

“Ek stel nie belang nie.”

“Stel jy nie daarin belang om die dam ’n naam te gee nie, of is dit Thoreau se boek wat jou nie interesseer nie?”

“Albei. Sodra die dam deel word van Wyatt-boorde sal dit waarskynlik Wyatt-dam genoem word. Wat boeke betref, wel, dis ’n mors van kosbare tyd.”

My maag maak ’n stadige, nare draai. “Ek kan verstaan dat ’n mens nie in die somer of wanneer daar geoes moet word tyd het om te lees nie, maar ’n mens kan tog sekerlik in die lang wintermaande – ”

“Alle boeke, behalwe die Bybel, is oppervlakkig – en die meeste kom van die duiwel.”

“Jy maak seker ’n grap. Boeke wat van die duiwel kom?”

Hy maak nie ’n grap nie.

“Die Bybel noem Satan ‘die vader van die leuen’ en storieboeke is niks anders nie as leuens wat deur die mens se eie bose verbeelding versin is. Ek sal dit nie in my huis toelaat nie.”

Ek stry teen my groeiende paniek. “Wat van *Pilgrim’s Progress* en – ”

“Dis ’n uitsondering. Luister, Betty, ons moet op ’n datum besluit.”

Ek staar stom na hom.

“Vir die troue,” verduidelik hy. “Sal die eerste Saterdag in Oktober vir jou genoeg tyd gee om jou voor te berei?”

’n Ewigheid sal nie genoeg tyd wees om myself voor te berei vir ’n lewe sonder boeke nie, wat nog te sê ’n leeftyd saam met Frank Wyatt. Tog sal ek oor twee kort maande belowe om my lewe saam met hierdie man deur te bring; om hom te eer en te gehoorsaam. Ek dwing myself om te onthou hoe bly Pa aan die etenstafel was en ek sê: “Die datum is reg met my.”

“Goed. Ek sal jou nou huis toe vat.”

“Ek sal liever stap, Frank,” sê ek vinnig. “En dankie vir die toer. Totsiens.”

Ek stap teen ’n vinnige pas teen die heuwel af en bid dat hy my nie sal volg nie. My trane loop reeds en net soos die klippe wat onder my voete teen die steilte af rol, weet ek dat ek dit nie sal kan keer nie.

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Walter sit buite op sy Adirondack-stoel – nog ’n “noodsaaklikheid” wat hy

van die huis af gebring het – toe ek daardie aand met sy kos opdaag. Hy kyk van sy boek af op toe hy my hoor naderkom en glimlag.

“Daar is jy, Betsy. Ek het jou met middagete gemis.”

Ek sak op die grond by sy voete neer en begin huil; smart en verligting deurmekaar geweef soos ’n string wol. Walter vang die skinkbord net betyds en sit dit op die gras neer. “Betsy ... Wat makeer?” vra hy sag.

Ek trek my asem ’n paar keer rukkerig in. “Die man wat my die hof maak ... het my gevra om te trou.”

“Ek sien. Dit lyk nou nie juis vir my of jy trane van vreugde stort nie. Was hy dan omgekrap toe jy hom geweier het?”

“Ek het nie geweier nie. Ek kon nie weier nie. My pa – ” Ek kan nie my sin klaarmaak nie. Walter druk sy sakdoek in my hand. Ek lig dit na my gesig om my trane af te droog en toe ek Walter se skoon suurlemoenreuk kry, huil ek nog harder.

“Ek is so jammer, Betsy,” sê hy sag. “Ek wens ek het geweet wat om te sê.”

“Dankie. Ek sal oukei wees.” Ek sukkel om myself reg te ruk. “Ek het net tyd nodig om gewoond te raak aan die idee.”

“Dink jy die liefde kan dalk tussen julle groei indien jy dit tyd gee?” vra hy.

“Ek is seker dit sal,” jok ek. Tog wonder ek hoe ek ooit lief sal word vir ’n man wat boeke haat. Ek trek my asem weer rukkerig in. “Was jy lief vir jou vrou toe jy met haar getroud is?”

Hy kyk lank na my. “Ek is nie getroud nie, Betsy. Ek is verloof, maar die troue is onbepaald uitgestel totdat my gesondheid herstel.”

“Ek is verbaas dat jou verloofde nie naby jou wil wees sodat sy jou kan versorg en jou só kan help om vinniger te herstel nie.”

Walter sug. “Dit is dalk hoe dit in storieboeke werk, maar nie sommer in die regte lewe nie. My huwelik sal net nog een van my pa se tallose besigheidstransaksies wees; ’n sosiaal gewigtige en finansiële nuttige huwelik vir sy enigste seun en erfgenaam. Nie ek óf die jong vrou sal dit durf waag om met Howard Knowles Gibson te stry nie. Ek het haar natuurlik al ontmoet, maar ons ken mekaar nie baie goed nie. My siekte het dit moeilik gemaak om haar behoorlik die hof te maak.”

Ek waag dit vir die eerste keer om na hom te kyk. “Dan is ek nie die enigste een wat teen my wil moet trou nie?”

“Dit is seker ’n geringe gerusstelling, maar nee, jy is nie die enigste een nie. In die sosiale kringe waarin ek gebore is, is die meeste huwelike gesluit uit stoflike oorwegings. Liefde en romanse speel selde ’n rol.”

Ek pluk-pluk aan 'n paar grashalms by sy voete en gooi dit dan in die wind. “Ek kan seker leer om sonder liefde te leef, maar ek weet nie hoe ek ooit sonder boeke sal leef nie. Die man met wie ek gaan trou, haat boeke. Hy sê hy sal geen boek in sy huis toelaat nie, behalwe die Bybel ... en dalk *Pilgrim's Progress*.”

Ek glimlag deur my trane by die blote gedagte aan die belaglikheid van Frank se onverdraagsaamheid. Walter glimlag terug.

“*Pilgrim's Progress* nogal? Ek is byna doodseker my verloofde het nog nooit eens daarvan gehoor nie.”

Toe lag ons en ek voel hoe die gelag se genesende krag my wonde salf. Ek kan nie onthou dat ek al een keer saam met Frank Wyatt gelag het nie, en die gedagte tref my skielik dat 'n leeftyd sonder lag dalk selfs erger kan wees as 'n leeftyd sonder boeke.

Ek besef skielik, sonder om te weet hoe of wanneer dit gebeur het, dat Walter my hand tussen sy eie vashou om my te troos. Dit voel soos die natuurlikste ding in die wêreld.

“Onthou jy die eerste dag toe ons ontmoet het, Betsy? Onthou jy die reël wat jy uit Thoreau aangehaal het oor die najaag van jou drome? Ek besef nou net iets ... Ek het jou nooit gevra wat daardie drome is nie.”

“Belowe jy sal nie lag nie.”

Hy dink vir 'n oomblik daaroor na en glimlag dan. “Nee, ek kan nie belowe nie. Sê nou net jy vertel my jy wil 'n Hindoe-slangbesweerder word of die kaptein van 'n walvisvaarder? Ek is jammer, ek sal dan eenvoudig moet lag.”

Ek weet my drome sal baie veilig wees by Walter. Ek glimlag terug en vertel hom dan. “Ek wil 'n skrywer wees. Om die waarheid te sê, dit is waarmee ek besig was die dag toe ons ontmoet het. Toe ek jonger was, het ek daarvan gedroom om 'n speurjoernalis te word, soos Nellie Bly.”

“Ek het haar al ontmoet.”

“Jy het nie!”

“Ja, Nellie Bly het eenkeer by 'n ete in New York oorkant my gesit. My pa is 'n goeie vriend van haar baas, Joseph Pulitzer.”

“Hoe is sy?”

“Om die waarheid te sê ... baie soos jy,” sê hy sag. “Behalwe dat jy makliker is om mee te gesels, en ook meer bedagsaam en welsprekend.” Ek kyk weg. Hy trek aan my hand tot ek weer vir hom kyk. “Ek is ernstig, Betsy. Ek sal met graagte namens jou met meneer Pulitzer praat, as jy wil hê ek moet. Ek kan jou help om 'n woonstel in New York te kry.”

Die versoeking is groot – o, so groot – maar ek weet dit is onmoontlik. “Ek kan nie,” sê ek hartseer. “My pa het sy hart op hierdie huwelik gesit.”

Walter maak sy oë vir oomblik toe en knik dan. “Ek verstaan. Ek verstaan regtig. Onthou, my pa is Howard Knowles Gibson.”

“Ja.” Ek wag tot hy my in die oë kyk en vra dan: “Wat is jou drome, Walter?”

Hy glimlag op sy skewe manier. “Om ’n Hindoe-slangbesweerder te wees en ook die kaptein van ’n walvisvaarder.” Dan verdwyn sy glimlag en hy skud sy kop. “Ek weet regtig nie. Vir so lank as wat ek kan onthou, het my pa nog altyd vir my gesê wat ek sal wees. Ek is sy erfgenaam. Ek sal eendag by hom oorneem ... en ek het nog altyd gesukkel om dit te aanvaar. Dit is nie net die werk nie, dit is alles wat daarmee saamgaan – die oordadige lewenstyl, die hele sosiale opset, die politiekery en onetiese saketransaksies. Ek weet dalk nie wat ek wil hê nie, maar ek weet beslis wat ek nie wil hê nie.” Hy sug en skud weer sy kop.

“Toe ek klaargemaak het met universiteit het ek my pa gesmeek om twee maande af te vat en ’n bietjie te gaan reis voordat ek my plek in die maatskappy inneem. Hy het baie teësinning ingestem, en ek het vir drie jaar weggebly. Ek het die wêreld deurreis. Die oerwoude van Borneo, die Ivoorkus van Afrika, die reënwoude van Brasilië ... Ek het selfs in Alaska gaan goud soek. Jy sien, ek moes ’n leeftyd se lééf in ’n baie kort tydjie inwerk.”

“Dit is al tyd wat ek ook het ... Twee maande.”

Hy los my hand en blaai deur die boek wat hy gesit en lees het toe ek aangekom het. Hy soek duidelik na iets. Ek sien die titel – *Walden Pond*.

“Luister hierna, Betsy. Thoreau skryf: ‘Let everyone mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made. Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.’”

Ek kyk in die skemering hoe ’n wilde-eend op die dam visvang; sy kop verdwyn skielik onder die water en sy stertvere wys na die donker wordende lug. “Ek dink nie ek of jy kan nog ons eie musiek hoor nie,” sê ek uiteindelik.

“Nee, seker nie,” sê Walter met ’n sug. “Daar is egter een keuse wat ons albei nog vry is om te maak. Jy sal eendag kinders hê, Betsy, en ek ook. Ons kan hulle toelaat om op die maat van hulle eie tromslaner te stap.”

Daardie aand skryf ek Walter se woorde in my notaboek neer sodat ek dit altyd sal onthou. Dan maak ek dit toe en steek dit diep in my laaikas weg. Ek is baie seker dit is die laaste woorde wat ek ooit sal skryf.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

**S**hortly after my engagement to Frank Wyatt, Lydia fell sick with a terrible case of food poisoning. When she woke up vomiting in the chamber pot for the third morning in a row, I begged her to go see a doctor.

“No, I’ll be all right,” she said with a groan. “Now move. I have to go to work.”

“I’ll ride into town and tell them you’re sick. Lydia, you’ll never get well if you don’t stay in bed.”

“Horse feathers. I don’t want to stay in bed.” She pulled off her nightgown and began dressing. I followed her around the tiny room, pleading with her to stay home and rest and recover.

“What if it’s influenza? You might spread it to all your customers!”

“Betsy...” she finally said, stopping so abruptly I bumped into her, “it isn’t food poisoning or the flu. It’s something much, much worse.”

“You’re dying? No, Lydia, I won’t let you die, I won’t! You can’t die!”

She smiled slightly at my histrionics, then took me by the shoulders and gave me a little shake. “I’m not dying, either. I’m...I’m in the family way.”

I gaped at her, not comprehending. “But that’s impossible! You aren’t married!”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “Oh, my sweet, innocent Betsy. You don’t have to be married to make a baby. I love Ted, and when you love someone...you’ll do anything for them.”

When I realized what she meant, I covered my face and wept. Lydia

pulled me into her arms. “Please don’t hate me, Betsy. If you turn your back on me now it will be the worst punishment of all.”

“I could never hate you.” I took her hand in mine and linked our pinkie fingers. “I’ll stand by you no matter what. Just don’t forget, you promised that I could be your maid of honor when you marry Ted, remember?”

“Ted doesn’t know about the baby yet,” she said. I could see that she was worried about telling him. “I’m meeting him tonight after work. That’s why I have to go.”

Lydia left without eating breakfast. When she hadn’t come home by midnight, I was certain that she and Ted had eloped. What on earth would I tell Father? Neither of us had even met Ted Bartlett. Should I tell Father about the baby or not? I paced in the front hallway in the dark, rehearsing what I would say to Father, when the front door opened a crack and Lydia crept inside. I expected the hallway to light up with her beautiful smile, but her tear-streaked face was pale with shock and despair.

“Lydia, what’s wrong? What happened?” The only thing I could imagine was that there had been a terrible train wreck and Ted Bartlett was dead.

“It’s Ted...he’s...Oh, Betsy, what am I going to *do*?”

She fell into my arms, sobbing. “Is he dead?” I whispered.

“Worse—he’s *married*!”

“Married! But he can’t be! He—”

“He already has a wife and two children,” she said between sobs. “He showed me their pictures. He’s been lying to me all this time, Betsy. *Lying*! And now my life is over. I’ve ruined my life and I don’t know what to do!”

I wrapped my arm around Lydia’s waist and helped her up the stairs to our room so we wouldn’t wake up Father. Lydia’s problem was my problem. We had vowed to take care of each other, and I wracked my

brain for a solution.

“Can’t he get a divorce?” I asked.

“He refused. Ted’s father-in-law owns the notions company he works for.”

I would have cheerfully loaded Father’s shotgun and murdered Ted Bartlett if I thought it would help.

“Listen,” I said, seating Lydia beside me on the bed, “I just remembered something. When I was in school I heard about a girl who had...you know...The same problem. And later on I heard that she went to a special home to have the baby. I can find out where that home is and you can just go away for a while until your baby’s born. Someone will adopt it, Lydia. When Nellie Bly investigated the baby-buying trade, she found out there are dozens of nice Christian families who are willing to legally adopt babies. Everything is going to be all right, I promise you.”

Lydia didn’t go to work for three days. She lay in bed crying, convinced that she had ruined her life. As soon as I could get away, I drove to the school and discreetly asked Mr. Herman if he knew about the special home for unwed mothers. When I re-turned, I told Lydia what I’d learned, hoping it would cheer her.

“No one will be able to tell that you’re expecting for a while, so you’ll only have to be away for four or five months. They’ll let you live right there in the home and you can have your baby there, too. When you come back home we’ll tell everyone you had rheumatic fever or that you went to stay with a dying aunt. No one will ever know the truth.”

“But how can I give my own baby away and never see him again?” she asked, rubbing her still-flat tummy. “He’s mine...mine and Ted’s.”

“You have to, Lydia. It’s the only way. Trust me, the baby will grow up in a good Christian home, and you’ll have a brand-new start in life. You’ll meet someone else in no time at all. There will always be

dozens of boys lining up to marry you.”

“Not if I’m tarnished goods.”

“I’ll make sure they never know,” I said, holding up my little finger.  
“I promise.”

After that, Lydia seemed resigned to her fate. She went back to the dry goods store the next day but came straight home from work every night, too exhausted from her pregnancy to run around. She didn’t even date on the weekends.

One night as we prepared for bed she asked me to read one of my poems to her. “It’s been ages since you’ve read to me, Betsy, and I know you must have written dozens and dozens of new ones by now.” I tried to avoid the truth by mumbling a faint excuse, but she suddenly gripped my arm. “I know! Will you write a new poem for me? A poem about my baby? I want to give it to him after he’s born so he’ll always know that I loved him even though I had to give him away.”

I closed my eyes. “I can’t...I don’t write poems any more.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“That part of my life is over now that I’m marrying Frank. He’s made it very clear that he wants nothing to do with poems or books or writing of any kind...except for the Bible.”

“Betsy, no! Don’t listen to him!”

“He’ll be my husband. I’ll have to listen to him.”

“It’s none of Frank’s business what you do when he’s not there. You can write during your free time, can’t you? While he’s out running around his stupid orchard?”

“You don’t understand. It’s not a matter of Frank *letting me* write—I *can’t* write. When I’m with Frank it’s like...It’s like I don’t have any more poems inside me. They’ve all shriveled up, Lydia, like blossoms after a frost.”

“But you’re a writer! It’s who you are.”

“Not anymore. I’m not the same person I used to be. Frank makes

me feel like someone else...someone he has created. I attend the Women's Missionary Guild now. I've even taken 'the pledge.' From now on I have to try to be the wife he wants me to be, the wife he expects me to be or..."

"Or what, Betsy?"

"Or he won't marry me."

Her velvety eyes searched mine as if trying to read my heart. "You don't love him, do you?"

"No," I said miserably. I didn't even have to think about it.

"Not even a tiny bit?"

"Not even a tiny bit." I sank onto the bed as I confessed my hopeless situation. "He hates books, Lydia. He won't allow any in his house. And he never laughs. I've never heard him, not even once, not after all this time together. I don't know how I'm ever going to stand it."

She knelt on the floor in front of me. "It's not too late to call the whole thing off. Tell him you want to cancel the engagement."

"I can't. Father will be furious. You know how badly he wants this partnership. He'll be so disappointed with me if I mess things up now, and I couldn't stand to disappoint him. He even made Frank promise to call it Wyatt & Fowler Orchards. If the deal falls through now, it will kill Father. It will absolutely kill him."

Lydia stared past me into the distance and a strange peace gradually came over her. She'd been desolate for the past few days, sunk deep in her own misery, and now, with a strength I'd never seen before, she made me dry my tears and gently nudged me into bed.

"Let's go to sleep, Betsy. Maybe things will look better for both of us in the morning." At the time I thought it was because we were both emotionally exhausted, but looking back, I realize that Lydia had made up her mind that night. She knew exactly what she needed to do. Drawing strength from her newfound tranquillity, I fell sound

asleep.

---

Later, Lydia told me how easy it had been to follow through on her plan. Frank came for dinner on Sunday, and as he was taking the shortcut home through our orchard, Lydia slipped out of the house and ran after him.

“Frank...Frank, wait! We found a pocket knife on the sofa. Is it yours?”

He turned to her, rummaging through his pants pockets. “I don’t think so. Mine is—”

Suddenly Lydia cried out as she tumbled to the ground. “Ow! Oh dear, how clumsy of me. I’ve turned my ankle.”

Frank rushed to her side. “Lydia, are you all right? Here, let me help you.” She allowed her hands to linger on his chest as he lifted her to her feet. “Is your ankle okay? Can you walk on it?”

“Yes...Ow! No...no, I don’t think I can.” She leaned against him. “Oh, I feel so silly! How will I get home?”

“I...I could carry you.”

“Oh, would you?” Lydia’s velvet eyes gazed up into his and Frank was a goner. Lifting her into his arms, feeling her slender arms around his neck, her body pressed close to his, merely sealed Frank’s fate.

She smiled up at him as they neared the house. “Thank you so much, Frank. You can leave me here on our porch. I’m embarrassed to have Father know how clumsy I am.”

We weren’t expecting Frank the following night, but he dropped by to ask Father a question. Lydia just happened to be outside, returning from a mysterious errand in the barn as he was leaving. “Thank you so much for your kindness last night,” she said, smiling.

“You’re welcome. How’s your ankle?”

“Oh, it’s much better. Silly of me to twist it like that. I guess I’m just

not used to walking on rugged terrain like you are. How do you do it all day?" She gazed up into his eyes.

"Well, I...I..."

"Whenever I see you riding on your wagon or out in your orchard, you look so tall and strong, like you could stand up against just about anything! You really love your work, don't you?"

"I...yes. Yes, I do."

"And your orchard is so beautiful, too! How do you get everything to grow the way you do? Wyatt Orchards is like the Garden of Eden! You must be very proud of all that you've built."

"Yes...Iam."

She took his hand and pressed it briefly between both of hers. "Thank you again, Frank." She stood on tiptoe to plant a shy, quick kiss on his cheek. "Good night."

The next night, after concocting another lame excuse to see my father, Frank lingered in our yard, hoping Lydia would appear. She came out of the darkness as he neared the barn.

"Frank!" Before he knew what had hit him, she was in his arms. "I've never felt this way about a man before," she murmured as they clung to each other.

"Oh, Lydia...you're so beautiful!" He kissed her, clumsy with passion, his broad hands gripping her, pressing her close to himself. Suddenly, Lydia pulled away.

"We shouldn't..."

"Lydia...please don't go."

She twisted from his grasp and hurried into the house. Helpless, he watched her go, beside himself with longing.

Frank called on me the following two nights but he had really come to see Lydia. All the while Frank and I sat outside together on the front porch, he seemed sweaty and on edge, glancing around nervously. After I said good-night and went inside, he waited for Lydia

by the barn, pacing. She didn't disappoint him.

Lydia teased him with stolen kisses and passionate embraces until the fire inside Frank Wyatt had been stoked red-hot. Then one night she led him into the barn, to the blanket she had waiting, spread out on the fresh, sweet hay. She became the downfall of this morally upright man as his ice-filled veins melted with years of stored-up desire.

They met in the barn every night for the next week, then one night Lydia didn't show up. By the time she reappeared a few nights later, Frank was half-crazed with yearning. He pulled her down beside him on the blanket in the barn.

"Where have you been, Lydia? I can't...I can't live without you!"

"There's something I need to tell you, Frank."

"Please don't say you can't see me anymore, Lydia! You're all I think about all day. I can't concentrate on anything, wondering if you'll be here, if I'll be able to hold you—"

"I'm going to have a baby."

It took a very long moment for the truth to sink in. Then Frank suddenly released her as if she were a live coal. "You can't be!"

"I can be, Frank, and I am. It's what happens when two people...do...what we did."

Shock extinguished the heat of Frank's passion. He shot to his feet. "What are you going to do?"

Lydia stood to face him, playing with the buttons on his shirt. "I think you mean, what are *wegoing* to do?"

"But...but I'm engaged to Betty. The wedding is next month."

Lydia laughed. "I'm sure she'll agree to cancel the engagement once she learns what her sister and her fiance have been doing."

"But she can't call off the wedding. I mean...your father and I made a deal. He promised to deed all his land to me. And his pond! I can't lose everything now!"



Lydia saw the real Frank Wyatt and she hated him. He didn't care one bit about her or her feelings, only about annexing her father's land. With so much greed in his heart, there would never be any room for love. But even though she knew the truth, Lydia threw herself into his arms—a sacrifice, tossed into the flames to be wholly consumed.

“Marry *me*, Frank. Not Betty,” she begged. “I can easily convince Father to deed the land to you once we're married. He won't refuse. He wants this deal as badly as you do. He won't care which daughter you marry as long as his grandson inherits Wyatt Orchards.”

“Are you sure? I have plans, you know, and I need that pond for—”

“Trust me, Frank.”

---

When Lydia didn't come home that night I was worried sick. She had been disappearing from the house for an hour or two every evening lately, but she wouldn't tell me where she'd been. “I just went for a little walk,” she would say. Or, “I needed to do some thinking.”

I suspected from her disheveled appearance each time she returned that she was meeting someone, but I was afraid to consider who it might be. I even thought about following her, but it terrified me to think where she might lead me. I would surely die if I found my sister with Walter Gibson.

On the morning after Lydia stayed out all night, I walked through the orchard with Walter's breakfast like a woman approaching the gallows. I fully expected to find my sister in his arms. But as I emerged into the clearing, it wasn't Lydia I saw with Walter but his driver and two porters. They had parked his carriage near the cottage and the servants were loading Walter's two chairs and all his books onto the back of a wagon.

My heart seemed to stop beating. Walter was leaving.

He stood near the bottom step, leaning on his cane as he peered

down the path, watching for me. When he spotted me, his relief was visible. “Betsy! Thank heavens! I was so afraid I would have to leave before you came.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked numbly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t know. The servants arrived early this morning with the news. It seems there is a business crisis of some sort, and my father has summoned me home immediately. I’m so sorry.”

“Yes...” I murmured. “Yes, so am I.”

I don’t know why it hadn’t occurred to me that Walter would leave one day soon. He had rented the cottage for a month and the time was nearly up. I hadn’t allowed myself to think about it any more than I’d allowed myself to think about my approaching wedding. Walter was always going to be here in the little stone cottage to talk to me and laugh with me—except now he wasn’t.

“Here, your breakfast is getting cold,” I said. “And it’s a long way to Chicago on an empty stomach.” I set the tray on the tailgate of the wagon. During the time we’d spent together I’d noticed that Walter’s illness caused a weakness in his arms as well as in his legs. He couldn’t lift anything heavier than a book.

Before Walter could reply, his driver emerged from the cottage and bowed slightly. “That’s the last box, sir.”

“Thank you, Peter. I’ll be ready in a moment.”

Walter motioned for me to follow him as he slowly hobbled across the grass toward the pond, out of his servants’ earshot. I glanced over my shoulder as I walked and saw the driver move the breakfast tray to the table on the porch and slam the tailgate closed. One of the horses whinnied as if impatient to leave.

When Walter finally halted I knew that we didn’t dare look at each other. Fighting tears, I bent to gather a handful of stones and began tossing them into the water. He gazed solemnly into the distance and sighed.

“We’ve talked of so many things this summer, Betsy. And now...now for the first time I’m at a loss for words.”

“I know...I don’t think there is an easy way to say good-bye.”

“No, I suppose not. I think it was Emily Dickinson who wrote, ‘Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell.’ ” He sighed again.

I threw my last rock into the water. The waves made a *shushingsound* as they gently lapped the shore, like a mother soothing her baby.

“Will we ever see each other again?” I asked, finally looking up at him. I had only a few more moments to memorize the contours of his face, the softness in his eyes. He turned to me at last and shook his head.

“I don’t think so.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” I could hardly speak past the terrible ache in my throat. “I’ll never forget you, Walter.”

“Nor I you. But ‘Better by far you should forget and smile, than that you should remember and be sad.’ ”

“Elizabeth Barrett Browning?” I guessed.

“Close. Christina Rossetti.” He took my hand in his. “I left a present for you in the cottage.”

I looked up at him in dismay. “But I have nothing to give you.”

“That’s not true. I’m a wealthy man from all that you’ve given me these past weeks. The Bible would call them ‘riches stored in hidden places.’ ” He lifted my hand to his lips and closed his eyes as he kissed it. I felt his warm breath on my skin. Then he let go and turned away.

I watched him through a haze of tears as he slowly limped across the grass to the carriage. The driver helped him climb aboard. Then Walter Gibson disappeared from my life, heading down the dusty road without looking back.

I don’t know how long I stood there beside the pond. Eventually I

stumbled up the porch steps and went inside the empty cottage. Walter's lemony scent lingered in the air and I wanted to close all the windows to hold it inside.

I found the present he'd left for me on the little table beside the window. It was one of his books. A leather-bound copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

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When I finally returned home, I was relieved to find Lydia in the kitchen, sitting across the bare table from our father. But I knew right away from the tension in the air that I had walked into the middle of something. Father's face was as white as milk and he looked so deeply shaken that I feared he would suffer apoplexy.

"Father, what's wrong! Are you all right?" It occurred to me that he might have found out about Lydia's baby.

"Sit down," he grunted, then he frowned at my sister. "Tell her, Lydia."

As I lowered myself into a chair I saw that once again my sister possessed an unnatural tranquillity. I couldn't imagine its source, but she was as calm as my father was upset.

"I have wonderful news, Betsy," she said. "I'm married! Frank Wyatt and I eloped last night."

The enormity of Lydia's sacrifice stunned me. I knew exactly why she'd made it. But my first thought, my overwhelming thought was, *I'm free. Thank God, I'm free!* My relief was so profound, I closed my eyes and wept. Father misinterpreted my tears.

"Now look what you've done!" he bellowed at Lydia. "You've destroyed months of bargaining and planning in a single night and you have the gall to call that good news?"

"I already told you," Lydia said, "Frank still wants to merge his orchard with ours. He's willing to sign legal papers and everything,

confirming the agreement you already made. But he's in love with me, not Betsy."

"Where in blazes is Frank?" he shouted. "Why didn't he come here to tell me this news himself?"

Because Frank Wyatt was a coward. Most bullies were. Lydia laid her hand on Father's arm.

"You need to calm down. All this shouting isn't good for your heart. I told you, Frank had to take care of his livestock. He's coming down with the wagon in a little while to move my things up to his house. You can talk to him then."

But Father wouldn't be calmed. "What about your sister? How could you do this to her? How is Betty supposed to hold her head up in church after sitting in the Wyatt pew for so many weeks? Don't you care about her feelings at all, you selfish hussy?"

I reached for Lydia's hand and our eyes met. Hers brimmed with love for me. She hadn't acted selfishly but selflessly. I wanted to explain the truth to my father but she silently pleaded for me not to. Still, I wanted him to know at least part of it.

"I'm not angry with Lydia at all," I said. "I don't love Frank."

"But what's to become of you now?" he asked hoarsely. "Nearly twenty-one years old and no marriage prospects. I won't always be around to take care of you, and then what?" He pushed his chair back and stood, wagging his finger in Lydia's face. "She's your responsibility now! Yours and Wyatt's! Since you're the one who's stolen her land and her future, it will be up to you to take care of her, you hear me?"

He slammed the kitchen door on his way out, rattling the dishes in the cupboards. I felt so emotionally drained, first from Walter leaving and now this, that I didn't think I could ever move from the chair. But Lydia still looked serene as she offered me a hand to help me up.

"Come upstairs and help me pack, okay, Betsy?"

As soon as I walked into the little room under the eaves that we'd shared all our lives, the enormity of Lydia's sacrifice struck me once again. "You shouldn't have done it," I wept as I helped pack her clothes. "We could have found another way if you didn't want to go to the home for unwed mothers."

"But I have everything I've ever wanted," she said with a smile. "A beautiful house, plenty of money...and I can still have my baby. I get to keep Ted's baby, and that's the best part of all."

I saw then that her serenity was merely a facade she had erected to keep her true feelings at bay. She still loved Ted Bartlett. But if she ever faced up to all that he'd taken from her she would start screaming and never be able to stop. He had stolen her trust, her virginity, her dream of a happily married life with him. But she wouldn't give up the only thing she had left—his baby. I wondered how long my sister could continue to avoid reality. And at what cost.

"You're married to *Frank*," I murmured, still finding it hard to comprehend.

"Yes. So what? You don't love him, Betsy, you told me you didn't."

"But you don't love him, either. You did this for me."

Lydia drew me into her arms. "We promised to take care of each other, remember? We made a pinkie-promise." Tears brimmed in her eyes as she held up her little finger.

"But this is too much," I cried as I hugged her tightly. "You paid much too great a price!"

Seven and a half months later, Matthew Fowler Wyatt was born.

## ~ Hoofstuk agt ~

Kort ná my verlowing aan Frank Wyatt word Lydia siek van ernstige voedselvergiftiging. Toe sy die derde oggend in 'n ry wakker word en dadelik in die kamerpot opbring, smee ek haar om 'n dokter te gaan sien.

“Nee, ek sal oukei wees,” sê sy met 'n kreun. “Gee nou eers pad. Ek moet by die werk kom.”

“Ek sal dorp toe ry en vir hulle gaan sê jy is siek. Lydia, jy sal nooit gesond word as jy nie in die bed bly nie.”

“Nonsens. Ek wil nie in die bed bly nie.” Sy trek haar nagrok uit en begin aantrek. Ek volg haar deur ons klein slaapkamer en smee haar om by die huis te bly waar sy kan rus en gesond kan word.

“Sê nou dit is griep? Jy kan die kieme na al jou klante versprei.”

“Betsy ... ” sê sy uiteindelik en gaan staan so skielik dat ek teen haar vasloop, “dit is nie voedselvergiftiging of griep nie. Dit is baie erger.”

“Is jy besig om dood te gaan? Nee, Lydia, ek sal dit nie toelaat nie. Ek sal nie! Jy kan nie doodgaan nie.”

Sy glimlag skeef vir my melodrama. Dan vat sy my aan die skouers en skud my liggies. “Ek is ook nie besig om dood te gaan nie. Ek ... ek is in die ander tyd.”

Ek gaap haar aan, verstaan nie mooi nie. “Maar dis onmoontlik. Jy is nie getroud nie.”

Haar oë skiet vol trane. “O, my dierbare, onskuldige Betsy. 'n Mens hoef nie getroud te wees om 'n baba te maak nie. Ek is lief vir Ted, en wanneer jy iemand liefhet ... sal jy enigiets vir hom doen.”

Toe ek besef wat sy bedoel, druk ek my gesig in my hande en huil. Lydia trek my teen haar vas. “Moet my asseblief nie haat nie, Betsy. As jy nou jou rug op my draai, sal dit die ergste straf van alles wees.”

“Ek sal jou nooit kan haat nie.” Ek vat haar hand en krul ons pinkies om mekaar. “Ek sal by jou staan, maak nie saak wat gebeur nie. Moet net nie vergeet dat jy belowe het dat ek jou strooimeisie kan wees wanneer jy en Ted trou nie.”

“Ted weet nog nie van die baba nie,” sê sy. Ek kan sien sy is bekommerd daaroor om hom te vertel. “Ek ontmoet hom vanaand ná werk. Dit is hoekom ek moet gaan.”

Lydia is daar weg sonder om ontbyt te eet. Toe sy teen middernag nog nie

by die huis is nie, is ek seker dat sy en Ted saam weggeloop het. Wat op aarde sal ek vir Pa vertel? Nie een van ons het al vir Ted Bartlett ontmoet nie. Moet ek vir Pa van die baba vertel of nie? Ek stap in die donker deur die voorkamer en oefen wat ek vir Pa gaan sê toe die voordeur skielik oopgaan en Lydia na binne glip. Ek verwag dat sy die donker gaan verlig met haar pragtige glimlag, maar haar betraande gesig is bleek van skok en wanhoop.

“Lydia, wat is fout? Wat het gebeur?” Die enigste gedagte wat by my opkom, is dat daar ’n verskriklike treinramp was en dat Ted Bartlett dood is.

“Dit is Ted ... hy ... O, Betsy, wat gaan ek doen?”

Sy val huilend in my arms. “Is hy dood?” fluister ek.

“Erger ... Hy is getroud!”

“Getroud? Maar hy kan nie wees nie. Hy – ”

“Hy het reeds ’n vrou en twee kinders,” sê sy tussen haar snikke deur. “Hy het vir my foto’s van hulle gewys. Hy het nog die hele tyd vir my gejoj, Betsy. Gejoj! En nou is my lewe verby. Ek het my lewe geruïneer en ek weet nie wat om te doen nie.”

Ek sit my arms om Lydia se middel en help haar met die trappe op na ons slaapkamer toe sodat ons nie vir Pa sal wakker maak nie. Lydia se probleem is my probleem. Ons het belowe om na mekaar om te sien, en ek breek my kop op soek na ’n oplossing.

“Kan hy nie skei nie?” vra ek.

“Hy weier. Ted se skoonpa besit die maatskappy waarvoor hy werk.”

Ek sal met graagte Pa se haelgeweer laai en vir Ted Bartlett vermoor indien dit enigsins sal help.

“Luister,” sê ek en laat Lydia langs my op die bed sit. “Ek dink nou net aan iets. Toe ek op skool was, het ek van ’n meisie gehoor wat ... jy weet ... dieselfde probleem gehad het. Later het ek gehoor sy het na ’n spesiale tehuis gegaan om die baba te hê. Ek kan uitvind waar daardie tehuis is en jy kan vir ’n rukkie weggaan totdat jou baba gebore is. Iemand sal die baba aanneem, Lydia. Toe Nellie Bly die handel in babas ondersoek het, het sy uitgevind daar is dosyne goeie Christenfamilies wat bereid is om babas wettig aan te neem. Alles gaan reg uitwerk. Ek belowe jou.”

Lydia gaan vir drie dae nie werk toe nie. Sy lê in die bed en huil, oortuig daarvan dat sy haar lewe geruïneer het. Die eerste keer wat ek ’n kans kry, ry ek skool toe en vra baie diskreet vir meneer Herman of hy van ’n spesiale tehuis vir ongehude moeders weet. Terug by die huis vertel ek vir Lydia wat ek uitgevind het met die hoop dat dit haar beter sal laat voel.

“Dit sal nog ’n hele rukkie wees voordat enigiemand sal kan sien jy verwag. Jy sal dus net vir vier of vyf maande hoef te gaan. Hulle sal jou daar



in die tehuis laat bly en jy kan jou baba daar kry. Wanneer jy terugkom huis toe, sal ons vir almal sê jy het rumatiekkoors gehad of het by 'n sterwende tante gaan bly. Niemand sal ooit die waarheid uitvind nie.”

“Hoe kan ek my eie baba weggee en hom nooit weer sien nie?” vra sy en vryf oor haar steeds plat magie. “Hy is myne ... Myne en Ted s'n.”

“Jy moet net, Lydia. Dit is die enigste manier. Vertrou my, die baba sal in 'n goeie Christelike huis grootword en jy sal van voor af kan begin. Jy sal sommer gou weer iemand ontmoet. Daar sal altyd dosyne mans in 'n ry staan om met jou te trou.”

“Nie noudat ek beskadigde goedere is nie.”

“Ek sal seker maak hulle vind nooit uit nie,” sê ek en hou my pinkie in die lig. “Ek belowe.”

Daarná lyk dit of Lydia haar in haar lot berus. Sy gaan die volgende dag terug werk toe, maar kom elke aand ná werk reguit terug huis toe, te moeg as gevolg van haar swangerskap om rond te jakker. Sy gaan nie eens oor naweke uit nie.

Een aand terwyl ons regmaak om te gaan slaap, vra sy ek moet vir haar een van my gedigte lees. “Jy het baie lank laas vir my gelees, Betsy, en ek weet jy moes teen hierdie tyd al dosyne nuwes skryf het.” Ek probeer die waarheid vermy deur 'n flou verskoning te mompel, maar sy gryp my skielik aan die arm. “Ek weet! Sal jy vir my 'n nuwe gedig skryf? 'n Gedig oor my baba? Ek wil dit ná sy geboorte vir hom gee sodat hy altyd sal weet ek het hom liefgehad selfs al moes ek hom weggee.”

Ek maak my oë toe. “Ek kan nie ... Ek skryf nie meer gedigte nie.”

“Wat bedoel jy? Waarvan praat jy?”

“Daardie deel van my lewe is verby noudat ek met Frank gaan trou. Hy het dit baie duidelik gemaak dat hy niks te doen wil hê met gedigte of boeke of enige vorm van skryf nie ... behalwe die Bybel.”

“Betsy, nee! Moenie na hom luister nie.”

“Hy gaan my man wees. Ek moet na hom luister.”

“Waarmee jy jou besig hou wanneer Frank nie daar is nie, het niks met hom te doen nie. Jy kan tog in jou vrye tyd skryf, of hoe? Terwyl hy buite in sy simpel boord rondhardloop.”

“Jy verstaan nie. Dit gaan nie net daaroor dat Frank my nie toelaat om te skryf nie, ek kan nie skryf nie. Wanneer ek by Frank is, is dit of ... of ek nie meer gedigte in my het nie. Elke liewe een het verdroog, Lydia, soos bloeisel ná die ryp.”

“Maar jy is 'n skrywer. Dit is wie jy is.”

“Nie meer nie. Ek is nie dieselfde mens wat ek voorheen was nie. Frank

laat my soos iemand anders voel ... iemand wat hy geskep het. Ek is nou deel van die susters se sendingvereniging. Ek het selfs 'die eed' afgelê. Van nou af moet ek die vrou probeer wees wat hy wil hê ek moet wees, die vrou wat hy verwag ek moet wees anders ... ”

“Anders wat, Betsy?”

“Anders sal hy nie met my trou nie.”

Haar sagte oë kyk soekend in myne asof sy probeer sien wat in my hart aangaan. “Jy is nie lief vir hom nie, nè?”

“Nee,” sê ek miserabel. Ek hoef nie eens daaroor na te dink nie.

“Nie eens ’n klein bietjie nie?”

“Nie eens ’n klein bietjie nie.” Ek sak op die bed neer en bely my hopelose situasie. “Hy haat boeke, Lydia. Hy sal dit nie in sy huis toelaat nie. Hy lag ook nooit nie. Ek het hom nog nooit gehoor nie, nie eens een keer in al die tyd dat ons saam is nie. Ek weet nie hoe ek dit ooit gaan verduur nie.”

Sy kniel voor my op die vloer. “Dit is nie te laat om die hele ding te keer nie. Sê vir hom jy wil die verlowing verbreek.”

“Ek kan nie. Pa sal woedend wees. Jy weet hoe graag hy hierdie vennootskap wil hê. Hy sal so teleurgesteld wees as ek nou ’n gemors van alles maak, en ek sal dit nie kan verdra om hom teleur te stel nie. Hy het selfs vir Frank laat belowe om dit Wyatt & Fowler-boorde te noem. As die ooreenkoms nou tot niet gaan, sal dit Pa se dood beteken.”

Lydia staar verby my die verte in en ’n vreemde vrede daal geleidelik oor haar neer. Sy was die afgelope paar dae baie troosteloos, diep weggesink in haar eie smart. Nou laat sy my skielik, met ’n sterkte in haar wat ek nog nooit tevore gesien het nie, my trane afdroog en sit my in die bed.

“Kom ons slaap, Betsy. Dalk lyk dinge môreoggend beter vir albei van ons.” Op daardie tydstip dink ek dit is dalk net omdat ons albei emosioneel uitgeput is, maar by terugskoue besef ek dat Lydia daardie aand haar besluit geneem het. Sy het geweet wat sy moet doen. Terwyl ek krag put uit haar nuutgevonde kalmte raak ek aan die slaap.

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Lydia het my later vertel hoe maklik dit was om haar plan deur te voer. Frank het Sondag by ons kom eet en toe hy ná ete kortpad deur ons boord vat, het Lydia uit die huis geglip en agter hom aan gehardloop.

“Frank ... Frank, wag! Ons het ’n knipmes op die bank gekry. Is dit dalk joune?”

Hy draai na haar toe terwyl hy deur sy broeksakke soek. “Ek dink nie so nie. Myne is – ”

Lydia roep skielik uit en val. “Eina! O aarde, hoe lomp van my. Ek het my enkel verstuit.”

Frank kom vinnig na haar toe. “Lydia, is jy oukei? Kom, laat ek jou help.” Sy laat haar hande op sy bors talm toe hy haar regop help. “Is jou enkel baie seer? Kan jy daarop trap?”

“Ja ... Eina! Nee ... nee. Ek dink nie ek kan nie.” Sy leun teen hom aan. “Ag, ek voel so simpel. Hoe gaan ek nou by die huis kom?”

“Ek ... ek kan jou dra.”

“Ag, sal jy?” Lydia se sagte oë kyk op in syne en Frank is betower. Die gevoel wat Frank ervaar toe hy haar in sy arms optel, haar slanke arms om sy nek voel, haar liggaam styf teen syne, verseël sy lot.

Sy glimlag vir hom toe hulle die huis nader. “Vreeslik dankie, Frank. Jy kan my sommer hier op die stoep los. Ek sal verleë voel as Pa moet weet hoe lomp ek is.”

Ons verwag Frank nie die volgende aand nie, maar hy kom tog daar aan om vir Pa iets te vra. Lydia is toevallig buite en keer net terug van iets geheimsinnigs wat sy in die skuur moes gaan doen toe Frank gereed is om te gaan. “Vreeslik dankie vir jou goedhartigheid gisteraand,” sê sy glimlaggend.

“Dis ’n groot plesier. Hoe voel jou enkel?”

“O, dit is baie beter. Dit was simpel van my om dit so te verstuit. Ek is seker maar net nie daaraan gewoond om soos jy oor ruwe terrein te loop nie. Hoe doen jy dit die hele dag?” Sy kyk op in sy oë.

“Wel, ek ... ek ... ”

“Wanneer ek jou op jou wa of in jou boord sien ry, lyk jy so lank en sterk, asof jy teen byna enigiets kan opstaan. Jy hou regtig baie van jou werk, nè?”

“Ja ... Ja, ek hou daarvan.”

“En jou boord is so mooi! Hoe kry jy dit reg om alles so mooi te laat groei? Wyatt-boorde lyk soos die Tuin van Eden. Jy is seker baie trots op alles wat jy opgebou het.”

“Ja ... ek is.”

Sy vat sy hand en druk dit vlugtig tussen albei hare vas. “Weereens dankie, Frank.” Sy staan op haar tone en soen hom vinnig, skaam op sy wang. “Goeienag.”

Die volgende aand, nadat hy weer ’n flou verskoning uitgedink het om my pa te sien, bly Frank op ons werf talm met die hoop dat hy vir Lydia sal sien. Sy kom uit die donkerte te voorskyn toe hy die skuur nader.

“Frank!” Voordat hy weet wat hom tref, is sy in sy arms. “Ek het nog nooit

voorheen só oor 'n man gevoel nie,” sê sy sag terwyl hulle aan mekaar vasklou.

“O, Lydia ... Jy is so pragtig.” Hy soen haar, lomp van hartstog, terwyl sy groot hande haar vasgryp en tot styf teen hom druk. Dan trek Lydia skielik weg.

“Ons kan nie ...”

“Lydia ... moet asseblief nie gaan nie.”

Sy wikkel haar uit sy omhelsing en hardloop terug huis toe. Hy staan hulpeloos en kyk, buite homself van begeerte.

Frank kom kuier die volgende twee aande by my, maar hy is eintlik daar om vir Lydia te sien. Die hele tyd terwyl ek en Frank buite op die voorstoep sit, kom hy sweterig en gespanne voor terwyl hy senuweeagtig rondkyk. Nadat ek hom gegroet en in die huis in is, wag hy by die skuur vir Lydia. Sy stel hom nie teleur nie.

Lydia terg hom met gesteelde soene en hartstogtelike omhelsings totdat die vuur in Frank Wyatt hoog brand. Dan lei sy hom een nag in die skuur in na die kombers wat sy vroeër op die vars, soet hooi oopgegooi het. So word sy die ondergang van dié moreel standvastige man, en sy ys gevulde are smelt as gevolg van jare se opgekropte begeerte.

Vir die volgende week ontmoet hulle elke aand in die skuur. Een aand daag Lydia skielik nie op nie. Teen die tyd dat sy 'n paar aande later wel haar opwagting maak, is Frank halfmal van begeerte. Hy trek haar langs hom op die kombers in die skuur neer.

“Waar was jy, Lydia? Ek kan nie ... Ek kan nie sonder jou lewe nie.”

“Daar is iets wat ek jou moet vertel, Frank.”

“Moet asseblief nie sê jy kan my nie meer sien nie, Lydia. Jy is al waaraan ek die hele dag dink. Ek kan op niks anders fokus nie. Ek wonder die hele tyd of jy hier sal wees, of ek jou sal kan vashou –”

“Ek gaan 'n baba hê.”

Dit vat baie lank vir die waarheid om in te sink. Dan los Frank haar skielik asof sy 'n warm kool is. “Dit kan nie wees nie.”

“Dit is, Frank, en ek gaan 'n baba hê. Dit is wat gebeur wanneer twee mense ... doen ... wat ons gedoen het.”

Skok blus Frank se passie. Hy spring op. “Wat gaan jy doen?”

Lydia staan op en kyk vir hom terwyl sy met die knope aan sy hemp speel. “Ek dink jy bedoel eerder wat gaan óns doen.”

“Maar ... maar ek is verloof aan Betty. Die troue is volgende maand.”

Lydia lag. “Ek is seker sy sal instem om die verlowing te verbreek wanneer sy hoor waarmee haar suster en haar verloofde besig is.”

“Sy kan nie die troue kanselleer nie. Ek bedoel ... Ek en jou pa het ’n ooreenkoms gemaak. Hy het belowe om al sy grond vir my te gee. En sy dam! Ek kan nie nou alles verloor nie.”

Lydia sien die ware Frank Wyatt en sy haat hom. Hy gee nie ’n snars om vir haar gevoelens nie; hy wil net haar pa se grond inpalm. Met soveel gierigheid in sy hart sal daar nooit enige plek wees vir liefde nie. Selfs al ken sy nou die waarheid, gooi Lydia haarself in sy arms – ’n offer, in die vlamme gegooi om geheel en al verteer te word.

“Trou met my, Frank. Nie met Betty nie,” smee sy. “Ek sal maklik vir Pa kan oorreed om die grond vir jou te gee nadat ons getroud is. Hy sal nie weier nie. Hy wil net so graag soos jy hê dat hierdie ooreenkoms ’n sukses moet wees. Hy sal nie omgee met watter dogter jy trou nie, solank sy kleinseun Wyatt-boorde erf.”

“Is jy seker? Ek het planne, jy weet, en ek het daardie dam nodig vir – ”

“Vertrou my, Frank.”

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Toe Lydia daardie aand nie huis toe kom nie, is ek byna siek van bekommernis. Sy het die afgelope paar aande gereeld vir ’n uur of twee verdwyn, maar sy wou nie vir my sê waar sy was nie. “Ek het net ’n entjie gaan stap,” sou sy sê. Of: “Ek moes alleen wees om te dink.”

Te oordeel na haar deurmekaar voorkoms wat ek opgemerk het elke keer wanneer sy terugkom, het ek vermoed dat sy iemand gesien het. Ek het dit selfs oorweeg om haar te agtervolg, maar ek was doodbang om te dink waarheen sy my kon lei. Ek sou sekerlik sterf as ek my suster by Walter Gibson moes kry.

Die oggend nadat Lydia die hele aand weg was, stap ek deur die boord met Walter se ontbyt soos ’n vrou wat die galg nader. Ek is doodseker ek gaan my suster in sy arms aantref. Toe ek egter in die oopte uitstap, is dit nie vir Lydia wat ek by Walter sien nie, maar sy drywer en twee pakdraers. Sy perdekarretjie staan naby die kothuis en die bediendes is besig om Walter se twee stoele en al sy boeke agterop ’n wag te laai.

Dit voel of my hart gaan staan. Walter gaan weg.

Hy staan naby die onderste trap en leun op sy kerie terwyl hy in die paadjie af kyk, op soek na my. Hy is duidelik verlig toe hy my raaksien. “Betsy! Dank die hemel! Ek was so bang ek sou moes gaan voordat jy hier aankom.”

“Gaan jy weg?” vra ek stomgeslaan. “Hoekom het jy my nie vertel nie?”

“Ek het nie geweet nie. Die bediendes het vroeg vanoggend hier aangekom met die nuus. Dit klink of daar ’n besigheidskrisis is en my pa wil hê ek moet dadelik huis toe kom. Ek is so jammer.”

“Ja ...” mompel ek. “Ja, ek ook.”

Ek weet nie hoekom ek nie daaraan gedink het dat Walter binnekort sal weggaan nie. Hy het die kothuis vir ’n maand gehuur en daardie tyd is nou byna verby. Ek het myself net so min toegelaat om daaraan te dink as wat ek myself toelaat om aan my naderende troue te dink. Walter sou altyd hier in die klein kothuis wees om met my te gesels en saam met my te lag – behalwe dat hy nie meer is nie.

“Hier, jou ontbyt word koud,” sê ek. “Die pad na Chicago is te lank om op ’n leë maag aan te pak.” Ek sit die skinkbord op die wa se flap neer. In die tyd wat ons saam deurgebring het, het ek gesien dat Walter se siekte maak dat beide sy arms en bene swak is. Hy kan niks swaarder as ’n boek oplig nie.

Voordat Walter kan antwoord, kom sy drywer by die kothuis uit en buig liggies. “Dit is die laaste boks, Meneer.”

“Dankie, Peter. Gee my net ’n oomblik.”

Walter beduie ek moet hom volg terwyl hy stadig oor die gras in die rigting van die dam stap, buite hoorafstand van sy bediendes. Ek kyk oor my skouer terwyl ek stap en sien hoe die drywer die skinkbord op die stoepafel neersit en die wa se flap toeslaan. Een van die perde runnik, asof hy ongeduldig is om langer te wag.

Toe Walter uiteindelik gaan staan, weet ek ons kan dit nie waag om na mekaar te kyk nie. Terwyl ek teen my trane stry, buk ek af om ’n handvol klippe op te tel wat ek dan in die water begin gooi. Hy staar stil die verte in en sug.

“Ons het hierdie somer oor soveel goed gesels, Betsy. En nou ... Nou weet ek vir die eerste keer nie wat om te sê nie.”

“Ek weet ... Ek dink nie daar is ’n maklike manier om te groet nie.”

“Nee, seker nie. Ek dink dit is Emily Dickenson wat geskryf het: ‘Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell.’” Hy sug weer.

Ek gooi my laaste klip in die water. Die golfies klots teen die dam se oewer, sag en rustig soos ’n ma wat haar baba sus.

“Sal ons mekaar ooit weer sien?” vra ek en kyk uiteindelik op na hom. Ek het nog net ’n paar oomblikke om die kontoere van sy gesig te memoriseer, die sagtheid in sy oë. Hy draai uiteindelik na my en skud sy kop.

“Ek dink nie so nie.”

“Ek was bang dat jy dit gaan sê.” Ek kan skaars verby die pynlike knop in

my keel praat. “Ek sal jou nooit vergeet nie, Walter.”

“Ek ook nie vir jou nie. Maar: ‘Better by far you should forget and smile, than that you should remember and be sad.’”

“Elizabeth Barrett Browning?” raai ek.

“Naby. Christina Rossetti.” Hy vat my hand. “Ek het vir jou ’n geskenkie in die kothuis gelos.”

Ek kyk ontsteld na hom. “Ek het dan niks om vir jou te gee nie.”

“Dit is nie waar nie. Ek is ’n ryk man op grond van alles wat jy die afgelope paar weke vir my gegee het. Die Bybel noem dit ‘verborge rykdomme’.” Hy lig my hand na sy lippe, maak sy oë toe toe hy my daarop soen. Ek voel sy warm asem op my vel. Dan laat hy my hand gaan en draai weg.

Ek kyk deur ’n waas trane hoe hy stadig oor die gras na sy perdekar toe stap. Die drywer help hom om in te klim. Dan verdwyn Walter Gibson uit my lewe en ry in die stowwerige pad af sonder om terug te kyk.

Ek weet nie hoe lank ek daar langs die dam gestaan het nie. Ek gaan uiteindelik terug, strompel by die stoep se trappies op en gaan by die leë kothuis in. Walter se suurlemoengeur hang nog in die lug en ek wil al die vensters toemaak om dit binne te hou.

Ek kry die geskenk wat hy vir my gelos het op die klein tafeltjie voor die venster. Dit is een van sy boeke. ’n Leergebinde eksemplaar van *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

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Toe ek uiteindelik teruggaan huis toe is ek verlig om vir Lydia in die kombuis te kry waar sy oorkant Pa by die kaal tafel sit. Te oordeel na die spanning in die lug weet ek egter dadelik dat hulle in die middel van iets is. Pa se gesig is so wit soos melk en hy lyk so diep geskok dat ek bang is hy gaan ’n beroerte kry.

“Pappa, wat makeer? Is Pa oukei?” Ek besef skielik dat hy dalk kon uitgevind het Lydia is verwagter.

“Sit,” kreun hy. Dan kyk hy fronsend na my suster. “Vertel haar, Lydia.”

Toe ek op ’n stoel neersak, sien ek weereens dat my suster onnatuurlik kalm is. Ek kan my nie die bron daarvan indink nie, maar sy is kalm en my pa ontsteld.

“Ek het wonderlike nuus, Betsy,” sê sy. “Ek is getroud. Ek en Frank Wyatt het gisteraand saam weggeeloop.”

Die ontsaglikheid van Lydia se offer slaan my dronk. Ek weet presies hoekom sy dit gedoen het. My eerste gedagte, my oorheersende gedagte is: *Ek is vry. Dank God, ek is vry.* My verligting is so diepgaande dat ek my oë toemaak en huil. Pa interpreteer my trane verkeerd.

“Kyk nou wat het jy gedoen!” skree hy op Lydia. “Jy het maande van bedinging en beplanning in een nag vernietig en dan het jy nog die vermetelheid ook om dit goeie nuus te noem?”

“Ek het reeds vir Pa gesê Frank wil nog steeds sy boord met ons s’n laat saamsmelt. Hy is bereid om wettige dokumente en alles te onderteken wat die ooreenkoms sal bevestig wat julle reeds gesluit het. Hy is egter lief vir my, nie vir Betsy nie.”

“Waar de hel is Frank?” skree hy. “Hoekom het hy nie hierheen gekom en self die nuus aan my oorgedra nie?”

Want Frank Wyatt is ’n lafaard. Die meeste boelies is. Lydia vat sag aan Pa se arm.

“Pappa moet eers kalmeer. Al hierdie geskree is nie goed vir Pappa se hart nie. Ek het mos gesê Frank moes na sy vee gaan kyk. Hy kom netnou met die wa hierheen om my goedjies op te vat na sy huis toe. Pappa kan dan met hom praat.”

Maar Pa kan nie kalmeer word nie. “Wat van jou suster? Hoe kon jy dit aan haar doen? Hoe is Betty veronderstel om haar kop hoog te hou by die kerk nadat sy vir soveel weke op die Wyatt-bank gesit het? Gee jy geen snars om vir haar gevoelens nie, jou selfsugtige flerie?”

Ek vat Lydia se hand en ons oë ontmoet. Haar oë is vol liefde vir my. Sy het nie selfsugtig opgetree nie, maar onbaatsugtig. Ek wil die waarheid aan my pa verduidelik, maar sy smeeke woordeloos dat ek dit nie moet doen nie. Tog wil ek hê hy moet ten minste ’n deel daarvan weet.

“Ek is glad nie kwaad vir Lydia nie,” sê ek. “Ek is nie lief vir Frank nie.”

“Maar wat gaan nou van jou word?” vra hy hees. “Amper een en twintig jaar oud en geen huweliksvooruitsigte nie. Ek sal nie altyd hier wees om vir jou te sorg nie, en wat gaan dan van jou word?” Hy stoot sy stoel agtertoe en staan op terwyl hy sy vinger byna onder Lydia se neus druk. “Sy is nou jou verantwoordelikheid. Joune en Wyatt s’n. Aangesien jy die een is wat haar grond en haar toekoms gesteel het, sal jy nou vir haar sorg. Hoor jy my?”

Hy slaan die kombuisdeur agter hom toe sodat die borde in die kas daarvan rinkel. Ek voel emosioneel so uitgeput, eerstens omdat Walter weg is en nou hierdie nuus, dat dit voel of ek nooit van die stoel af sal kan opstaan nie. Lydia lyk egter steeds kalm toe sy haar hand uithou om my op te help.

“Kom saam boontoe dan help jy my pak, Betsy.”



Die oomblik toe ek by die klein kamertjie onder die dakrand instap wat ons nog ons lewe lank deel, tref die ontsaglikheid van Lydia se opoffering my weer. “Jy moes dit nie gedoen het nie,” huil ek terwyl ek haar help om haar klere in te pak. “Ons kon aan ’n ander manier gedink het as jy nie na die tehuis vir ongehude moeders wou gaan nie.”

“Ek het alles wat ek nog ooit wou gehad het,” sê sy glimlaggend. “’n Pragtige huis, genoeg geld ... en ek kan steeds my baba hê. Ek kan Ted se baba hou, en dit is die beste deel van alles.”

Dan sien ek dat haar kalmte net ’n front is wat sy voorhou om haar ware gevoelens weg te steek. Sy is steeds lief vir Ted Bartlett. As sy egter moet eerlik wees oor alles wat hy van haar gesteel het, sal sy begin skree en nooit weer kan ophou nie. Hy het haar vertrou, haar maagdelikheid, haar droom van ’n gelukkig getroude lewe saam met hom gesteel. Sy sal egter nie die een ding opgee wat sy oorhet nie – sy baba. Ek wonder hoe lank my suster dit sal regkry om die werklikheid te vermy. En teen watter prys.

“Jy is met Frank getroud,” sê ek sag. Ek vind dit steeds moeilik om te glo.

“Ja. Wat daarvan? Jy is nie lief vir hom nie, Betsy. Jy het dit tog self gesê.”

“Maar jy is ook nie lief vir hom nie. Jy het dit vir my gedoen.”

Lydia omhels my. “Ons het mos belowe om na mekaar te kyk. Ons het ’n pinkiebelofte gemaak.” Haar oë skiet vol trane toe sy haar pinkie in die lug hou.

“Hierdie opoffering is te groot,” roep ek uit en hou haar styf vas. “Jy het ’n te groot prys betaal.”

Sewe en ’n half maande later is Matthew Fowler Wyatt gebore.

# Wyatt Orchards

*Spring 1931*

“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;  
The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing  
of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard  
in our land....”

SONG OF SONGS 2:11–12

## CHAPTER NINE

**B**y the time Aunt Batty finished her tale, I felt numb. The boys had arrived home from school, and I could hear them on the back porch, thumping the snow off their boots. Becky had fallen asleep on the rug with both cats curled up beside her. I was about to get up and see about starting supper when Aunt Batty clamped her hand on my arm to stop me.

“Your children deserve their own dreams,” she said quietly. “Don’t ask them to live yours. Maybe they’ll want this old orchard someday, maybe they won’t. If it’s your dream to make a home here, then good, fight to keep this place for yourself. But don’t do it for them. You’ll heap so much guilt on the poor little things they’ll never be able to hear their own music. Let them follow the beat of their own drummer.”

Later, when I was alone upstairs, I went into Becky’s bedroom and looked at Aunt Batty’s photograph again. She was right— Walter Gibson did have kind eyes. But this time I also noticed the limpness in his slight body, the way he sat as if it required an enormous effort to hold himself together. No wonder Aunt Batty had to help him shave.

Funny, she hadn’t mentioned shaving him in her story this afternoon.

All of a sudden I got that strange, tingling feeling again. If Aunt Batty shaved Gabe Harper like she’d wanted to do last week, maybe she would recognize him as Matthew Wyatt. It was worth a try. But first I would have to figure out a way to talk them both into it.

I waited until Aunt Batty brought Gabe his supper tray that night

and followed her into his room. “I’ve been thinking,” I said, leaning casually against the door frame. “Now that your hobo story is finished and all mailed off to Chicago there’s really no need to be looking like a hobo anymore, is there?”

“Um...I suppose not.” He scratched his chin self-consciously. “But I guess I’ve grown used to having a beard after all this time. It feels like part of me.”

“Well, my kids get used to having dirt behind their ears, too, but I make them take a bath anyhow, whether they want one or not. Now, I’m thinking you’re long overdue for one. You’re finally well enough to wash yourself—so a shave and a haircut would finish up the job real nice. Don’t you think so, Aunt Batty?”

“Sure thing, Toots. And as I said, I’m a real crackerjack at shaving people.”

I could tell by the way Gabe ate with his head bent down, and by how quiet he’d become, that he wanted to be shaved about as much as Queen Esther and Arabella did. I would have to bully him into it.

“I once saw ‘The Wild Man of Borneo’ in a sideshow act,” I said, “and he wasn’t half as woolly as you are. Can you cut hair, too, Aunt Batty?”

“Why, sure. Nothing to it—snip, snip!” She made scissoring motions with her fingers.

Gabe ran his hand through his hair protectively. “Um, listen—”

“Tonight would be a real good night for a bath, too, “ I added. “The reservoir on the stove is full of hot water. Why not get all cleaned up?”

“Can we watch you shave him?” Jimmy asked. I was still leaning against the doorjamb and all three kids ducked beneath my outstretched arm like a game of “London Bridge.”

I smiled sweetly. “You don’t mind if they watch, do you, Gabe?”

He was trapped and he knew it. “I guess not.”

Aunt Batty grabbed a hank of Jimmy's shaggy bangs and pretended to cut them with her fingers. "Maybe I should practice on you while Mr. Harper finishes his dinner."

"Naw. Mama says company should always go first," Jimmy said, wriggling out of her grasp.

"All right, then. Can one of you boys tell me where your daddy kept his razor and shaving soap?" she asked.

"I'll get you what you need," I said.

Sam's shaving things were still in the washstand in the kitchen where he'd left them. An age-cracked mirror in a painted wood frame hung above it. As I opened the drawer, I remembered how Sam would shave in front of that mirror every morning, and how the smell of his shaving soap would slowly drift through the kitchen. When the weather got warm he would move the washstand onto the back porch, picking it up like it weighed nothing at all, so he could clean up outside in the fresh air.

Sometimes Sam would put a dab of shaving cream on Jimmy's face and hold him up to the mirror and let him shave it off with a teaspoon. Jimmy and Luke loved to watch their daddy strop his razor blade on the leather belt. One time little Luke said that the sound of the blade slurping back and forth reminded him of a thirsty horse lapping water, and Sam and I had laughed and laughed.

The boys had never known how their grandfather had used a leather strap just like that one to beat his two oldest sons when they were boys. Sam had whispered the awful truth to me one night in the darkness of our bedroom. He'd held me tightly and told me how he'd hated the sight of that belt in his father's hand. His older brother, Matthew, had always seemed to get the worst of it. Big as he was, Sam had trembled as he'd remembered, and he'd vowed never to use a belt on his sons that way.

I lifted the mug of shaving soap to my nose. It smelled like Sam. I

thought of Aunt Batty trying to keep Walter's lemony scent in her little cottage after he'd gone, and I wished I had loved Sam the way she had loved Walter. Instead, I had used Sam to get what I'd wanted the same way Frank Wyatt had planned to use Aunt Batty. I was no better than he was.

I gathered Sam's shaving things together, along with a towel and a pair of scissors, and returned to Mr. Harper's room. He had finished eating.

"Aunt Batty's barber shop is now open for business," she declared as we helped Gabe out of bed and onto a chair. He was still pretty weak and shaky. She tied the towel around his neck and trimmed his hair first, chattering a blue streak while she worked.

When she was ready to shave him, I fetched a basin of warm water and set it on his lap, then stood nearby, ready to call a halt to the proceedings if Aunt Batty began to butcher him. But she was surprisingly good at it, just as she'd said. She didn't draw a single drop of blood. And she had done a good job on his hair, too. She gave him a hand mirror and a hairbrush and let him comb it himself.

"Thank you," he said as he stroked his bare chin. "I look like myself again."

The man who emerged from beneath all that hair proved to be the biggest surprise of all. I felt like I'd just watched a woolly caterpillar turn into a butterfly. Mr. Harper had a lean, oval shaped face with a strong, square jaw—but without the deep cleft in his chin that all the Wyatt men had. He wasn't as old as I had imagined him to be, but surprisingly young, in his thirties—Matthew Wyatt's age. His wavy, dark brown hair might have come from Ted Bartlett; his high forehead and curved brows might have come from Lydia Fowler.

"What a handsome thing you are without all that fur!" Aunt Batty exclaimed. "Put on some decent clothes and you could pass for a gentleman."

“But first he needs a bath,” I reminded her. “Instead of him climbing all those stairs to the bathroom, the boys can help me drag the old copper tub in here and fill it up. Then I want everyone to clear out and give him some privacy—and that means you, too,” I said, shooing Winky and the two cats off his bed. “Think you can get in and out by yourself?” I asked him.

“I’ll manage.” It was much easier to see Gabriel Harper blush with his face shorn.

I could scarcely wait to get Aunt Batty out of his room to ask if she had recognized him. “You did a nice job shaving him,” I said as we filled buckets with hot water from the reservoir for the boys to haul. We’d already moved the bathtub into his room. “Gabe sure does look different now, doesn’t he?”

“Like a newly shorn sheep.”

“Does he look at all familiar to you, Aunt Batty?” I held my breath as she thought for a moment.

“Well, now that you mention it, he reminds me of a young Robert E. Lee, the famous general. Lee was a handsome man, don’t you think? Even if he was on the losing side?”

I exhaled in frustration. “What I mean is, do you see a...a *family* resemblance.”

“Oh, I couldn’t say, Toots. I never met Mr. Harper’s family.”

I would have to come right out and say it. “Take a good look at him, Aunt Batty. Is he Matthew Wyatt?”

“Matthew! Don’t be silly, Toots! His name is Gabriel Harper. He’s a writer. From Chicago.” She pronounced the words slowly and carefully, as if I were senile. “Matthew went to fight in that awful war.”

“That war has been over for more than ten years. Please...look at him *closely*. You said he looked familiar, remember?”

“Did I?”

“Yes! The first time you met him. Could he be Matthew, finally home after all these years? Look at him, Aunt Batty. He’s about the same age Matthew would be.”

She peered into his room as if she expected him to jump out of bed and beat her with a stick, then she shook her head. “Oh, no. He’s not Matthew.” She seemed certain. I didn’t know whether to believe her or not. I was so frustrated I wanted to shake her.

“Are you *sure* he isn’t Matthew?”

“Positive, Toots.”

I wasn’t convinced. I saw too many similarities between Aunt Batty’s story and Gabe’s story for them to be a mere coincidences. While Gabe splashed in the tub, I got out the photograph album again to study Matthew’s pictures. When I happened upon one of Lydia, I suddenly realized why she looked familiar to me. I could swear she was the same woman I’d seen in Gabe’s Bible—or was I imagining things? I wished I could get another peek at his picture and compare the two, but the Bible no longer lay beside his bed. He must have put it back inside his burlap bag.

When Gabe finished bathing he changed into a clean pair of Sam’s long johns and crawled back into bed. He looked exhausted. I quickly bailed out the bath water and cleaned the tub, then returned to his room one last time to make sure his leg was all right. I had grown accustomed to having a shaggy old tramp in the house, but this new Gabe looked like such a different man that I felt like I was tending a stranger all over again. And Aunt Batty was right—he was a mighty fine-looking man.

“So tell me, Gabe,” I said, without looking up from examining his leg, “do you have a wife and family waiting for you back home somewhere?”

“No.”

I dabbed on some more iodine. “You’ve never been married or



you're just not married at the moment?"

"I've never been married."

Good. Then if he was Matthew Wyatt I could get him to fall in love with me and marry me and we wouldn't lose our home. I'd won a man's heart once before so I knew I could do it again. But wasn't I already living with the guilt of what I'd done? I don't know why, but I couldn't look at Gabe. I also don't know why, but my heart started hammering like a woodpecker.

"I want to ask you something. The name 'Gabriel Harper' sounds sort of...phony. Is it your real name or a pen name?"

He didn't answer. I knew that trick and I figured I could wait him out without speaking. But he took so long that curiosity finally made me look up. He frowned at me.

"Why all the questions? What difference does it make?"

"In other words, Gabe isn't your real name."

He looked surprised and more than a little angry. "I didn't say that. Don't start putting words in my mouth."

"Well, why can't you just be honest with me and tell me flat out? Yes or no?"

"Who says I'm being dishonest? I've never lied to you."

Maybe not, but I was an expert at dodging the truth and I knew it was exactly what Gabe was doing.

"You didn't answer my question, either," I said, planting my hands on my hips. "I asked you if Gabe was your real name and you said it didn't matter. But it matters to me."

"Why?" He pierced me with his angry eyes. "Why should it matter to you?"

I couldn't answer without telling him too much. Until I was certain who he was, I didn't want him to find out that Matthew Wyatt owned everything. He'd cornered me just like I'd cornered him. Neither one of us was willing to bring our secrets out of their hidden places. I

carefully pulled his pant leg back down and covered his foot with the sheet.

“Shall I turn off your light?” I asked as I stood to go, “or would you like it left on for a little while?”

“Please turn it off. Thank you.”

“By the way,” I said over my shoulder, “you smell a whole lot better than you did.”

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Now that she’d cleaned Gabe up, Aunt Batty took it upon herself to get him out of bed every day and walk him all around so he could rebuild his strength. One morning she hiked down to her cottage and brought back a beautiful ebony walking cane with a silver handle.

“I thought maybe you could use this,” she said, presenting it to him like a trophy.

Gabe looked it over with wonder. “This is almost too fine to use, Aunt Batty. It looks like a family heirloom. Are you sure—?”

“Of course I’m sure. I have no use for it. And if the day ever comes that I do need a cane, I’m much too short to use that one.”

I glanced at the handle—it was carved in the shape of a dog’s head. “Was that Walter Gibson’s cane?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s beautiful, isn’t it? He left it with me when he went away. I’ve always kept the handle polished so it would look nice. It’s real silver, you know.”

But that didn’t match the story she’d told me the other day. She’d said Walter had walked away without turning back, and I got the impression that he couldn’t walk without his cane. Walter had given her a book for a present, not this. And what about shaving him? Where did that fit in? Aunt Batty’s stories had more holes than Swiss cheese.

I let her and Gabe hobble around together while I sat down in Frank

Wyatt's office and made a list of everything that needed to be done in the orchard. I'd lived here ten years so I had a pretty good idea of the routine, if not all the particulars, and I knew that during the winter months Sam and Frank had always trimmed trees. Later the trees would have to be fertilized. Then sprayed. Frank had always moved the beehives into the orchard after he sprayed so the bees could pollinate the trees. Once the weeds started growing I would have to disk between the rows, then run through them with a drag to even it out again. The vegetable garden would have to be plowed and planted, and the asparagus picked. The animals would need hay and corn. I numbered the paper from one to ten and wrote all these things down, trying not to let them overwhelm me. I would worry about picking and selling the fruit when the time came.

On a beautiful, sunny winter morning I made up my mind to start trimming trees—after I figured out how, that is. I hoped Gabe or Aunt Batty could tell me because it would just about kill me to have to ask one of my neighbors, like Alvin Greer, for help. I found Gabe and Aunt Batty down by the barn, leaning on the pasture fence while Becky swung back and forth on the gate.

"There's a branch on that big oak tree out front that would be the perfect place to hang a swing," I heard Gabe saying as I approached. "But first we'll have to find a sturdy board and some rope."

"Can it just be *myswing* and no one else's?" Becky asked.

"Oh, but you'll get twice the joy out of that swing if you share it," Aunt Batty said. "That's what the Bible teaches."

"Are there swings in the Bible?" Becky asked in amazement.

"I'm sure there must be one or two," Aunt Batty said. "Let me think. 'Swing low, sweet chariot'? No, that's a song...."

Winky spotted me first and he trotted over to greet me. I angled toward him so he could find me. Then Becky saw me, too. "Mama, guess what! Mr. Harper said he would make me a swing!"

“That’s very kind of him,” I said, bending to pat Winky’s head. “Listen, I was wondering if either of you knew anything about trimming fruit trees?”

“You do it in the wintertime,” Aunt Batty said confidently, “while the trees are dormant. This is a bit late to be getting started, though. Good thing we had that last snowstorm to postpone spring a little longer.”

“But do either of you know how to do it? Have you actually trimmed trees before?”

Gabe shook his head. “I can’t honestly say I’ve done it, but I once interviewed a fruit grower for a newspaper article. I know the general theoretical principles behind it.”

“Don’t use fancy words, Gabe. Just tell me what needs to be done.”

“The idea is to open up the center of the tree so the light can penetrate and the fruit will ripen better. You also want to get rid of the smaller, newer branches that take energy away from the fruit-bearing limbs.”

“It’s just like the story Jesus told in the Bible,” Aunt Batty added. “The gardener prunes the branches so the tree will bear more fruit. And any branch that doesn’t bear fruit is cut off and thrown into the fire. Then—”

I quickly jumped in to cut off her sermon. “If I drove you out to one of the trees, Gabe, do you think you could you coach me through it?”

His jaw dropped. “You’re not thinking of tackling this job yourself!” I could read his expressions easily now that his beard was gone and his hair was out of his eyes, and I could clearly see that I’d shocked him. It was the same reaction that Frank or Sam might have had if I’d stepped forward and offered to do their work.

“If I don’t tackle it, it won’t get done,” I said. “Now, can you show me how to do it or not?”

“I’ll do it for you, ma’am. I believe I’m nearly well enough...If I take

it slow.”

“Good. You can help me. The work will go much faster with two of us.”

Gabe’s frown deepened to genuine displeasure. “But I really don’t think you can do it. I mean...Those trees are bigger around than you are.”

“So?”

“So!” He grabbed my arm and wrapped his fingers around my wrist. It was so slender his fingers overlapped. “The branches you’ll be cutting are bigger around than this.”

“Now, children, don’t fight,” Aunt Batty said sweetly. “There’s plenty of work for both of you.”

I pried his fingers off my wrist with a smile of triumph. “And plenty of tools for both of us, too.”

“What about my new swing?” Becky whined as she followed us into the tool shed. I turned in time to see the look Gabe gave her as he rested his hand on her curly red hair. It was so gentle and loving, so...*fatherly*, that it brought a lump to my throat.

“I’ll get to it, honey,” he said in a voice as soft as cats’ paws. “I promise.”

“And what about fixing Aunt Batty’s roof?” My words came out harsher than I’d intended them to.

“That can wait, Toots,” Aunt Batty said. “But trimming trees can’t.” She took Becky by the hand. “Brr. I’m getting chilly out here. Let’s you and me go inside and bake a pie for dinner, all right?”

Neither Gabe nor I spoke as we sorted through the equipment. I itched to get started, but Gabe paused to carefully examine each of the saws and tree-trimmers first.

“Some of these blades look pretty dull,” he said. “I think I’d better sharpen them.” He carried them straight into the barn and went right inside Sam’s workshop like he knew exactly where he was going. He

sat down at the grindstone and started treading the pedals to make the wheel spin as if he'd been doing it all his life.

"Did you once write an article about sharpening tools, too?" I asked nastily.

He concentrated so hard on his task that several moments passed before he looked up. "What did you say?" It was a look of pure innocence—or perfect acting, I couldn't tell which.

"You seem to know your way around a grindstone," I said.

"Yes. Would you mind bringing me a little water to pour on this stone? Thanks." He picked up a file and began sharpening one of the saw blades with it.

As I went to fetch some water I remembered that Gabe had cleaned out the barn for me and spent a night in Sam's workshop. That would explain how he knew his way around. But as I watched him work, his hands seemed mighty skillful for a city boy's.

I caught him wincing when he finished and he bent to massage his injured leg.

"Is it hurting again?" I asked.

"It's not too bad."

I hurried out of the barn ahead of him and lugged two pickers' ladders over to the truck. Gabe limped up with the tools in time to help me shove everything into the back. I climbed behind the wheel and he hoisted himself into the passenger's seat. Snow still covered the ground so I drove slowly, not wishing to get the truck stuck in a drift. I stopped at the closest grove of trees, just beyond the barn. I could have walked there much faster, but Gabe couldn't have.

As I pulled to a stop, I glanced down and noticed the big space between us on the front seat. That got me thinking about Aunt Batty's story and how Lydia had advised her to make sure her thigh "accidentally" brushed against Frank's. I got such a funny picture in my head of tiny little Aunt Batty trying to cozy up to my stuffy old

father-in-law that I laughed out loud.

“What’s so amusing?” Gabe asked, smiling.

“Nothing...I...” but I couldn’t get the picture out of my mind. I knew exactly how horrified Frank would have been if she’d actually done it, and I laughed until the tears came. Gabe waited. “I’m sorry,” I said wiping my eyes. The story was much too complicated to explain, so I said, “My father-in-law must be rolling over in his grave. You have no idea how he babied these trees.”

He nodded and climbed from the truck. When I walked around to his side he was already studying the nearest tree. “Your father-in-law’s attention to detail will make our job simple,” he said. “He has these trees shaped very nicely. See how easy it is to tell the fruit-bearing limbs from the new growth? These are what we have to trim back.” He pointed to several slender branches growing every which-way from the trunk and the central limbs.

“Then I guess we’d better get started.” I brushed past him and began hauling out one of the ladders. He stood watching me.

“Listen, Eliza...”

I knew by his tone of voice that he was about to tell me all over again how I was much too scrawny to trim trees. It reminded me so much of my daddy telling me what I could and couldn’t do that I whirled around to face him with my hands on my hips.

“What, Gabe?”

He looked at me for a long moment, then shook his head. “Nothing. I just wanted to warn you that those blades are sharp.”

It was hard work—dragging the ladder from tree to tree, climbing up and down dozens of times, reaching over my head and stretching and clipping and sawing. I kept wishing I had overalls on instead of an annoying old skirt that got in my way every five minutes. By lunchtime my toes had grown so numb from the cold that I couldn’t feel them anymore.

The trees were unending—row after row of them, perfectly spaced in straight, even lines. I recalled Sam once telling me that his father planted a hundred trees to an acre—and there were acres and acres of them. By the end of the day my legs and shoulders and neck ached so bad I wanted to cry, but I still had more trees to trim tomorrow. I was willing to bet that Gabe was hurting pretty bad, too, but we were both much too stubborn to admit it.

On the third or fourth day of work Gabe brought along his army canteen. In spite of Aunt Batty's denials, I still suspected that he might be Matthew Wyatt, so when he sat down on the running board of the truck to take a drink, I decided to ask him about the war.

"I see you brought back a little souvenir from the army," I said. "Did you fight in the Great War?"

He took a long swallow and wiped his mouth before answering. "I got this canteen from a tramp named Loony Lou. He was a very sick man the night I met him. I suspected he had pneumonia from the way he coughed. So I hung around him for a couple of days, feeding him, keeping him warm, pounding him on the back good and hard whenever he needed it. He nearly died, but when he finally pulled through he insisted that I keep the canteen as his way of saying thanks. It was the only thing of any value that he owned." Gabe stood and held it out to me. "Want some?"

"No thanks." I was an expert at telling lies myself so I figured I should be able to spot one pretty easily. This story had a ring of truth to it.

Gabe had climbed all the way back up the ladder again before I realized that he had neatly avoided telling me whether or not he had fought in the war.

No matter how hard we worked, it seemed like more trees always stretched forever into the distance like a house of mirrors. As long as the weather wasn't too windy or cold, we worked at it every day



during daylight hours. I fell into bed exhausted each night and dreamt about trees, with branches that reached out toward me like scrawny arms that tried to grab me and strangle me. I would wake up in a cold sweat, grateful that it was just a dream—until I remembered that I still had more trees to trim tomorrow.

“You don’t have to work so hard, Gabe,” I told him one afternoon. He had sunk down on the truck’s running board for the third time to take a break. I thought he looked a little pale.

“I’m just trying to keep up with you,” he said with a faint smile.

“You’re not getting feverish again, are you?” I pulled off my glove and felt his forehead. His brow was cool. When I realized what I’d just done, I turned away in embarrassment. I gazed down the long rows of trees we’d already finished, with the piles of brush heaped beneath them, then looked at the long row we still had to trim. When I finally risked a glance at Gabe, he was staring at me with an odd look on his face—as if he’d never seen me before.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked.

He blushed. “I...nothing. I admire you, that’s all. You’re an amazing woman.” He lifted the canteen to his lips and took a swig. “How long have you been trying to run this orchard on your own?”

“Only a few months. Just since my father-in-law died last November.”

“How did he die?”

“He dropped dead of a heart attack. The doctor said he was gone in a matter of minutes. At least he had the courtesy to wait until after the harvest was all in.”

“And your husband?”

“He passed away a little over a year before his father.”

“Listen, I know it’s none of my business, but why don’t you hire some help? There are plenty of men out there who are looking for work.”

“I can’t afford it. My father-in-law left some debts.”

He swallowed another drink. “Do you think you can run this place all by yourself?” He might have lit a match to kerosene, my temper flared so hot and so fast.

“I can’t tell you how sick I am of everybody asking me that! Every time I hear those words it just makes me all the more determined to hang on. This is my home! My kids’ home! Nothing and nobody is ever going to force us out of here. I may not run things the way Frank Wyatt did, but this is the only home I’ve ever had and so help me God, I won’t be homeless again!”

Gabe resembled a dog with his tail between his legs after my outburst. I flung him a quick apology. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to yell.”

“That’s all right,” he said quietly. “I know what it’s like to be homeless, too.”

My heart softened a bit. “Riding the rails, you mean?”

“Not only then.” He fumbled with the lid to the canteen, trying to screw it back on straight. “I really don’t have a place to call home. I lived in a boardinghouse in Chicago before I started my travels.”

“Don’t you have a family?”

“No.”

My heart softened a bit more. I wanted to ask him what had become of his folks, but I knew that if he asked me the same question I wouldn’t answer it. Besides, if he was Matthew Wyatt I already knew the answer. Gabe stood and stretched his arms and shoulders, swiveling his head in a circle to get the kinks out of his neck.

“I think I know just how achy you feel,” I said quietly.

He gave me a slow, gentle smile. “Yes. I’m quite sure you do.”

We both looked away at the same time as if realizing that we’d given away too much of ourselves.

“Well, I guess we’d better get back to work,” I said, looking at the row ahead of us.

“What about all those piles of brush?” he asked, looking at the sections we had already finished.

“I don’t know what to do with it all, but I know it can’t stay there. I remember Sam telling me that dead wood attracts insects. He always used to run the hay rake down the rows to collect the brush at one end.”

“Can’t we use some of the bigger pieces for kindling?”

The way Gabe said *wegave* me a funny feeling. I wasn’t sure if it was a contented feeling or an irksome one. “Yes, once it’s dried out,” I said. “Even so, there’s way too much of it.”

“I was wondering...you know how the hobos sometimes camp down by the railroad tracks? I think some of them might be willing to gather up the wood for us and haul it away if we let them use it for their bonfires.”

He’d said it again—*we*.

“All right,” I said after a moment. “But make sure you tell them to camp on my property, on this side of the tracks. The other side belongs to Alvin Greer, and he’ll call the sheriff to run them off.”

I let Gabe borrow the truck that evening. He filled the back of it with brush and drove the first load down to the railroad crossing for his friends to use. In the weeks that followed I would see people creeping through the orchard around dinnertime, gathering up armloads of branches—pitiful men and sometimes women, dressed in shapeless rags. One or two of them didn’t look much older than my Jimmy. They were homeless, hungry, cold.

As I sat down each night to the meals Aunt Batty cooked, I prayed that my kids and I wouldn’t end up like them.

# DEEL III

## Wyatt-boorde

*Lente 1931*

Kyk, die reëntyd is verby, die reën is oor, dis weg.  
Daar is bloeisels in die veld, dit het tyd geword om te sing;  
die tortelduif se stem klink oor ons land.

Hooglied 2:11-12

## ~ Hoofstuk nege ~

Teen die tyd dat tannie Batty haar storie klaar vertel het, voel ek stomgeslaan. Die seuns het intussen van die skool af teruggekom en ek hoor hulle op die agterstoep waar hulle die sneeu van hulle stewels af stamp. Becky het op die mat aan die slaap geraak met al twee katte langs haar opgekrul. Ek wil net opstaan om met aandete te begin toe tannie Batty my arm vasgryp om my te keer.

“Jou kinders verdien hulle eie drome,” sê sy sag. “Moet hulle nie vra om jou drome uit te leef nie. Dalk wil hulle eendag hierdie ou boord hê, dalk nie. As dit jou droom is om hier vir julle ’n tuiste te skep, is dit goed so. Baklei dan om die plek vir jouself te hou. Moet dit egter nie vir hulle doen nie. Jy sal soveel skuldgevoelens op die arme bloeitjies laai dat hulle nie hulle eie musiek sal kan hoor nie. Laat hulle die maat van hulle eie tromslaner volg.”

Toe ek later alleen bo in die huis is, gaan ek in Becky se kamer in en kyk weer na tannie Batty se foto. Sy is reg – Walter Gibson het vriendelike oë gehad. Hierdie keer sien ek egter ook die mankheid in sy tingerige lyf; die manier waarop hy sit, lyk of dit uiterste inspanning verg. Geen wonder tannie Batty moes hom help skeer nie.

Dis vreemd dat sy nie vanmiddag in haar storie vertel het dat sy hom geskeer het nie.

Ek kry skielik weer daardie vreemde, tintelende gevoel. As tannie Batty vir Gabe Harper skeer soos sy verlede week al wou gedoen het, sal sy hom dalk herken as Matthew Wyatt. Dit is die moeite werd om te probeer. Ek moet egter eers aan ’n manier dink om hulle al twee te oorreed.

Ek wag totdat tannie Batty daardie aand Gabe se aandete op die skinkbord sit en volg haar dan na sy kamer toe. “Ek het gedink,” sê ek en leun gemaklik teen die deurkosyn. “Noudat jou boemelaarstorie klaar getik en weggestuur is Chicago toe, het jy tog nie meer ’n rede om soos ’n boemelaar te lyk nie, of hoe?”

“Mm ... Seker nie.” Hy krap sy ken selfbewus. “Ek het gewoonnd geraak daaraan om ná al die tyd ’n baard te hê. Dit voel nou deel van my.”

“Wel, my kinders raak ook gewoonnd daaraan om vuilheid agter hulle ore te hê, maar ek dwing hulle in elk geval om te bad, of hulle nou wil of nie. Ek dink regtig jy kan doen met een. Jy is uiteindelik gesond genoeg om jouself te bad, so ’n skeer en haarsny sal die prentjie mooi afrond. Dink tannie Batty nie

ook so nie?”

“Beslis, Toots. Soos ek al gesê het, is ek baie goed daarmee om mense te skeer.”

Aan die manier waarop Gabe koponderstebo sit en eet en aan hoe stil hy geword het, kan ek sien dat hy net so min soos Queen Esther en Arabella geskeer wil word. Ek sal hom moet dwing.

“Ek het eenkeer ‘The Wild Man of Borneo’ in ’n vertoning gesien,” sê ek, “en hy was nie halfpad so wollerig soos jy nie. Kan tannie Batty hare ook sny?”

“Natuurlik. Dit is doodmaklik – snip-snip!” Sy maak ’n skêrbeweging met haar vingers.

Gabe druk sy hand beskermend deur sy hare. “Mm ... luister – ”

“Vanaand is boonop ’n goeie aand vir ’n bad,” gaan ek voort. “Die groot pot op die stoof is vol warm water. Waarom dan nie sommer skoon kom nie?”

“Kan ons kyk hoe julle hom skeer?” vra Jimmy. Ek leun steeds teen die deurkosyn en al drie kinders loer onderdeur my arm.

Ek glimlag liefies. “Jy sal mos nie omgee as hulle kyk nie, of hoe, Gabe?”

Hy is in ’n hoek gekeer, en hy weet dit. “Seker nie.”

Tannie Batty kry ’n stuk van Jimmy se lang kuif beet en maak of sy dit met haar vingers sny. “Dalk moet ek eers op jou oefen terwyl meneer Harper sy aandete eet.”

“Nee wat. Mamma sê altyd gaste eerste,” sê Jimmy en wikkel hom uit haar greep los.

“Nou goed dan. Kan een van julle seuns vir my sê waar julle pappa sy skeermes en skeerseep gebêre het?”

“Ek sal bring wat Tannie nodig het,” sê ek.

Sam se skeergoed is nog steeds in die wastafel in die kombuis waar hy dit gelos het. ’n Baie ou spieël met ’n geverfde houtraam hang bo die tafel. Toe ek die laai oopmaak, onthou ek hoe Sam elke oggend voor dié spieël geskeer het en hoe die reuk van sy skeerroom stadig oor die kombuis kom hang het. Wanneer dit warm genoeg was, sou hy die wastafel na die agterstoep skuif – hy het dit opgetel asof dit niks weeg nie – sodat hy buite in die vars lug kon skeer.

Sam het soms ’n bietjie skeerroom op Jimmy se gesig gesit en hom dan opgetel sodat hy dit in die spieël met ’n teelepel kan afskeer. Jimmy en Luke het altyd graag gekyk hoe hulle pappa die skeermeslem teen ’n skeerriem skerpmaak. Luke het eenkeer gesê die slurpgeluid van die lem wat heen en weer beweeg, herinner hom aan ’n dors perd wat water drink, en ek en Sam het lank en lekker daaroor gelag.

Die seuns het nooit geweet dat hulle oupa presies so 'n skeerriem gebruik het om sy twee oudste seuns mee te slaan toe hulle klein was nie. Sam het die aaklige waarheid een aand in die donkerte van ons slaapkamer vir my gefluister. Hy het my styf vasgehou en vertel hoe hy dit gehaat het om daardie skeerriem in sy pa se hand te sien. Sy ouer broer, Matthew, het altyd die ergste deurgeloopt. Al was Sam reeds 'n volwasse man, het sy lyf gebewe toe hy my vertel het, en hy het belowe om nooit 'n gordel op so 'n manier op sy seuns te gebruik nie.

Ek lig die houertjie skeerseep na my neus. Dit ruik soos Sam. Ek dink aan tannie Batty wat Walter se suurlemoengeur in haar klein kothuisie wou hou nadat hy weg is, en ek wens ek het Sam liefgehad op die manier waarop sy vir Walter lief was. In plaas daarvan het ek vir Sam gebruik om te kry wat ek wou hê, net soos Frank Wyatt van plan was om vir tannie Batty te gebruik. Ek is niks beter as hy nie.

Ek maak Sam se skeergoed bymekaar en kry ook 'n handdoek en 'n skêr. Dan gaan ek terug na meneer Harper se kamer toe. Hy het klaar geëet.

“Tannie Batty se barbierswinkel is nou oop vir besigheid,” sê sy toe ons vir Gabe uit die bed uit en tot op 'n stoel help. Hy is nog baie swak en bewerig. Sy maak die handdoek om sy nek vas en sny eerste sy hare terwyl sy die hele tyd gesels. Toe sy gereed is om hom te skeer gaan haal ek 'n skottel vol warm water en sit dit op sy skoot. Dan bly ek naby aan hulle staan, gereed om die hele gedoente stop te sit indien tannie Batty hom begin afslag. Sy is egter verbasend goed daarmee, net soos sy gesê het. Sy skeer hom nie een keer raak sodat die bloed loop nie. Sy het nogal sy hare ook mooi gesny. Sy gee vir hom 'n handspieël en borsel en los hom dat hy dit self kan kam.

“Dankie,” sê hy terwyl hy oor sy kaal ken vryf. “Ek lyk nou weer soos myself.”

Die man wat agter al daardie hare te voorskyn kom, is egter die grootste verrassing van alles. Dit voel of ek sopas gestaan en kyk het hoe 'n wollerige wurm in 'n skoenlapper verander. Meneer Harper het 'n slanke ovaalvormige gesig met 'n sterk, vierkantige kakebeen – maar sonder die diep keep in sy ken wat al die Wyatt-mans het. Hy is nie so oud as wat ek gedink het hy is nie, maar verbasend jonk en iewers in sy dertigs – Matthew Wyatt se ouderdom. Hy kon sy krullerige donkerbruin hare dalk by Ted Bartlett gekry het; sy breë voorkop en geboë wenkbroue kan weer van Lydia Fowler kom.

“Wat 'n aantreklike man is jy sonder jou pels!” roep tannie Batty uit. “As jy nou vir jou netjiese klere aantrek, kan jy deurgaans as 'n ware heer.”

“Hy moet eers bad,” herinner ek haar. “In plaas daarvan dat hy al die pad met die trap opgaan boontoe kan die seuns my help om daardie ou koperbad

hier in te sleep en dit vol te maak. Dan wil ek hê almal moet uitgaan en vir hom 'n bietjie privaatheid gee, en dit beteken julle ook,” sê ek en jaag vir Winky en die twee katte van die bed af. “Sien jy kans om op jou eie in en uit te klim?” vra ek vir hom.

“Ek sal regkom.” Dit is baie makliker om Gabriel Harper te sien bloots noudat sy gesig skoon geskeer is.

Ek kan skaars wag om vir tannie Batty by die kamer uit te kry sodat ek haar kan vra of sy hom herken het. “Tannie het hom baie netjies geskeer,” sê ek terwyl ons emmers uit die groot skottel met warm water volmaak sodat die seuns dit kan aandra. Ons het klaar die bad tot in sy kamer gesleep. “Gabe lyk sommer heeltemal anders, nê?”

“Soos 'n pas geskeerde skaap.”

“Lyk hy nie dalk vir tannie Batty bekend nie?” Ek hou my asem op terwyl sy oor my vraag nadink.

“Wel, noudat jy dit noem, moet ek sê dat hy my aan 'n jong Robert E. Lee herinner, die bekende generaal. Lee was 'n aantreklik man, of hoe? Selfs al was hy aan die verloorkant.”

Ek blaas my asem gefrustreerd uit. “Wat ek bedoel is of Tannie dalk 'n ... 'n familie-ooreenkoms sien.”

“O, ek sal dit nou nie kan sê nie, Toots. Ek het nog nooit meneer Harper se familie ontmoet nie.”

Ek sal maar reguit moet wees. “Kyk 'n bietjie mooi na hom, tannie Batty. Is hy Matthew Wyatt?”

“Matthew! Moenie laf wees nie, Toots. Sy naam is Gabriel Harper. Hy is 'n skrywer. Van Chicago.” Sy spreek die woorde stadig en versigtig uit, asof ek seniel is. “Matthew is weg om in daardie aaklige oorlog te gaan veg.”

“Daardie oorlog is al vir langer as tien jaar verby. Asseblief, kyk van naderby na hom. Tannie het tog gesê hy lyk bekend.”

“Het ek?”

“Ja. Die eerste keer toe Tannie hom ontmoet het. Kan hy nie Matthew wees wat ná al die jare uiteindelik teruggekom het huis toe nie? Kyk na hom, tannie Batty. Hy is omtrent net so oud as wat Matthew nou moet wees.”

Sy loer versigtig by sy kamer in, asof sy verwag hy gaan uit die bed uit spring en haar met 'n stok slaan. Dan skud sy haar kop. “O nee. Hy is nie Matthew nie.” Sy klink baie seker. Ek weet nie of ek haar moet glo of nie. Ek is so gefrustreerd ek voel lus om haar te skud.

“Is Tannie séker hy is nie Matthew nie?”

“Positief, Toots.”

Ek is nie oortuig nie. Ek sien te veel ooreenkomste tussen tannie Batty en



Gabe se verhare dat dit blote toeval kan wees. Terwyl Gabe bad, haal ek weer die fotoalbum uit om na foto's van Matthew te kyk. Toe ek toevallig na een van Lydia kyk, besef ek skielik hoekom sy vir my so bekend lyk. Ek is doodseker dit is dieselfde vrou wat ek in Gabe se Bybel gesien het – of verbeel ek my dinge? Ek wens ek kan weer na sy foto kyk en die twee met mekaar vergelyk, maar die Bybel lê nie langer langs sy bed nie. Hy moes dit seker in sy goingsak gebêre het.

Toe Gabe klaar gebad het, trek hy 'n skoon paar van Sam se wintersonderklere aan en klim terug in die bed. Hy lyk uitgeput. Ek skep vinnig die badwater uit en was die bad. Dan gaan ek terug na sy kamer toe om seker te maak sy been is versorg. Ek het gewoon geraak daaraan om 'n vuil ou boemelaar in die huis te hê, maar hierdie nuwe Gabe lyk nou soveel anders dat dit van voor af voel asof ek 'n vreemdeling versorg. Tannie Batty is reg. Hy is 'n baie aantreklike man.

“So, sê my, Gabe,” sê ek sonder om op te kyk van waar ek besig is om sy been te versorg, “het jy 'n vrou en kinders wat iewers by die huis vir jou wag?”

“Nee.”

Ek sit versigtig nog jodium op. “Was jy nog nooit getroud nie, of is jy net nie op die oomblik getroud nie?”

“Ek was nog nooit getroud nie.”

Goed. As hy dan wel Matthew Wyatt is, kan ek hom verlief laat raak op my en dan sal hy met my trou en sal ons nie ons huis verloor nie. Ek het eenkeer tevore 'n man se hart gewen; ek sal dit weer kan doen. Maar moet ek dan nie reeds met die skuldgevoelens saamleef van wat ek gedoen het nie?

Ek weet nie hoekom nie, maar ek kan nie na Gabe kyk nie. Ek weet ook nie hoekom nie, maar my hart begin so vinnig klop soos 'n houtkapper se snawel wat teen 'n boomstomp hamer.

“Ek wil jou iets vra. Die naam ‘Gabriel Harper’ klink so 'n bietjie ... vals. Is dit jou regte naam of net jou skrywersnaam?”

Hy antwoord nie. Ek ken nou al dié truuk van hom en besluit ek kan wag vir sy antwoord sonder om weer te praat. Hy vat egter so lank dat nuuskierigheid my uiteindelik laat opkyk. Hy frons vir my.

“Hoekom al die vrae? Watter verskil maak dit tog?”

“Met ander woorde, Gabe is nie jou regte naam nie.”

Hy lyk verbaas en meer as net 'n bietjie kwaad. “Ek het dit nie gesê nie. Moenie woorde in my mond begin plaas nie.”

“Wel, hoekom kan jy nie net eerlik wees en vir my 'n reguit antwoord gee nie? Ja of nee?”

“Wie sê ek is oneerlik? Ek het nog nie een keer vir jou gejok nie.”

Dalk nie, maar ek is ’n kenner as dit by die ontwyking van die waarheid kom en ek weet presies waarmee Gabe besig is.

“Jy antwoord ook nie my vraag nie,” sê ek en sit my hande op my heupe. “Ek het jou gevra of Gabe jou regte naam is en jy het gesê dit maak nie saak nie. Maar dit maak vir my saak.”

“Hoekom?” Hy kyk stip na my met sy woedende oë. “Hoekom moet dit vir jou saak maak?”

Ek kan nie antwoord sonder om vir hom te veel te vertel nie. Ek wil eers met sekerheid weet wie hy is voordat hy kan uitvind dat alles aan Matthew Wyatt behoort. Hy het my nou in ’n hoek gedryf net soos ek hom in ’n hoek gedryf het. Nie een van ons is bereid om ons geheime bekend te maak nie. Ek trek sy broekspyp versigtig af en maak sy voet met die laken toe.

“Kan ek jou lig afsit?” vra ek toe ek opstaan om te gaan. “Of wil jy dit nog ’n rukkie aan hê?”

“Sit dit asseblief af. Dankie.”

“Terloops,” sê ek oor my skouer, “jy ruik baie beter as aan die begin.”

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Noudat sy hom skoongeskeer het, neem tannie Batty dit op haarself om hom elke dag uit die bed uit te kry en saam met hom rond te stap sodat hy sy kragte kan opbou. Een oggend stap sy af na haar kothuis toe en kom terug met ’n pragtige kiere van ebbenhout met ’n silwer handvatsel.

“Ek het gedink jy kan dit dalk gebruik,” sê sy en gee dit vir hom asof dit ’n trofee is.

Gabe kyk vol verwondering daarna. “Dit is byna te mooi om te gebruik, tannie Batty. Dit lyk na ’n erfstuk. Is Tannie seker – ?”

“Natuurlik is ek. Ek het geen nut daarvoor nie, en as die dag ooit aanbreek dat ek wel ’n kiere nodig het, is ek in elk geval heeltemal te kort om dié een te gebruik.”

Ek kyk na die handvatsel. Dit is uitgekerf in die vorm van ’n hond se kop. “Was dit Walter Gibson se kiere?” vra ek.

“Ja, dit is pragtig, nè? Hy het dit hier by my gelos toe hy moes weggaan. Ek het die handvatsel gereeld gepoleer sodat dit mooi kan lyk. Dit is regte silwer.”

Dit is egter nie wat sy my nou die dag vertel het nie. Sy het gesê Walter het weggestap sonder om terug te kyk, en ek het die idee gekry dat hy nie sonder

sy kerie kon loop nie. Walter het vir haar 'n boek as geskenk gegee, nie hierdie kerie nie. En wanneer het sy hom dan geskeer? Waar pas dit in? Tannie Batty se stories het meer gate in as Switserse kaas.

Ek laat haar en Gabe maar rondhobbel terwyl ek in Frank Wyatt se studeerkamer gaan sit en 'n lys maak van alles wat in die boord gedoen moet word. Ek bly al tien jaar hier; dus het ek 'n redelik goeie idee van die roetine, alhoewel nie al die besonderhede nie, en ek weet dat Sam en Frank in die wintermaande altyd die bome gesnoei het. Die bome sal dan later bemesting moet kry. Dan bespuit word. Frank het altyd die byekorwe na die boord toe geskuif nadat hy dit bespuit het sodat die bye die bome kan bestuif. Sodra die onkruid begin groei, moet ek tussen die rye ploeg en dan met die eg deurgaam om dit weer gelyk te maak. Die groentetuin moet geploeg en die groente geplant word, en ek moet die aspersies pluk. Die diere gaan hooi en mielies nodig hê. Ek skryf die nommers een tot tien neer en langs dit alles wat gedoen moet word terwyl ek my bes doen om nie oorweldig te voel nie. Ek sal my eers bekommer oor die pluk en verkoop van die vrugte wanneer die tyd daarvoor aanbreek.

Op 'n pragtige, sonnige wintersoggend besluit ek om die bome te begin snoei – dit is nou nadat ek uitgepluis het presies hoe om dit te doen. Ek hoop Gabe of tannie Batty kan vir my sê, want dit sal my amperse dood beteken as ek een van my bure, soos Alvin Greer, vir hulp moet vra. Ek kry vir Gabe en tannie Batty onder by die skuur waar hulle op die weiveld se heining leun terwyl Becky op die hek swaai.

“Daar is 'n tak aan daardie groot eikeboom aan die voorkant van die huis wat die perfekte plek is om 'n swaai te hang,” hoor ek vir Gabe sê toe ek hulle nader. “Ons moet egter eers 'n stewige stuk hout en tou kry.”

“Kan dit net my swaai wees en niemand anders s'n nie?” vra Becky.

“O, jy sal twee keer soveel vreugde uit daardie swaai kry as jy dit deel,” sê tannie Batty. “Dit is wat die Bybel ons leer.”

“Is daar swaaie in die Bybel?” vra Becky verwonderd.

“Ek is seker daar is een of twee,” sê tannie Batty. “Laat ek dink. ‘Swing low, sweet chariot’? Nee, dis 'n lied ...”

Winky sien my eerste raak en draf nader om my te groet. Ek loop in sy rigting sodat hy my kan kry. Dan sien Becky my ook. “Mamma, raai wat! Meneer Harper sê hy sal vir my 'n swaai maak.”

“Dit is baie gaaf van hom,” sê ek en buk af om Winky se kop te vryf. “Luister, ek het gewonder of een van julle dalk enigiets oor die snoei van vrugtebome weet.”

“'n Mens doen dit in die winter,” sê tannie Batty selfvoldaan, “terwyl die

bome in hul rustydperk is. Dit is nou eintlik 'n bietjie laat om daarmee te begin. Ook maar goed ons het daardie laaste sneeustorm gehad om die lente so 'n klein bietjie uit te stel.”

“Maar weet een van julle hoe om dit te doen? Het een van julle dalk al voorheen bome gesnoei?”

Gabe skud sy kop. “Ek kan in alle eerlikheid nie sê dat ek dit al gedoen het nie, maar ek het eenkeer vir 'n koerantartikel 'n onderhoud gevoer met 'n vrugteboer. Ek ken die algemene teoretiese beginsels daaragter.”

“Moenie slim woorde gebruik nie, Gabe. Vertel my net wat gedoen moet word.”

“Die idee is om die middel van die boom oop te maak sodat die lig kan inkom en die vrugte beter kan ryp word. Jy moet ook ontslae raak van die kleiner, nuwe takke wat die energie wegneem van die takke wat vrugte dra.”

“Dit is net soos die storie wat Jesus in die Bybel vertel het,” voeg tannie Batty by. “Die tuinier snoei die takke sodat die boom meer vrugte sal dra. Enige tak wat nie vrugte dra nie, word afgesny en in die vuur gegooi. Dan – ”

Ek onderbreek haar vinnig om haar preek kort te knip. “As jy saam met my na een van die bome toe ry, Gabe, dink jy jy sal my leiding kan gee terwyl ek dit doen?”

Sy mond val oop. “Jy oorweeg dit tog nie om hierdie taak self aan te pak nie!” Noudat sy baard weg en sy hare uit sy oë is, kan ek sy gesigsuitdrukking maklik lees en ek kan nou duidelik sien dat ek hom geskok het. Dit is dieselfde reaksie wat Frank of Sam sou gehad het as ek skielik sou aangebied het om hulle werk te doen.

“As ek dit nie aanpak nie, gaan dit nie gedoen word nie,” sê ek. “So, kan jy my wys hoe om dit te doen, of nie?”

“Ek sal dit vir jou doen, Mevrouw. Ek glo ek is byna gesond genoeg ... as ek dit stadig vat.”

“Goed. Jy kan my help. Die werk sal vinniger klaarkom as twee van ons saamwerk.”

Gabe frons dieper en hy lyk nou erg ontevrede. “Ek dink regtig nie jy kan dit doen nie. Ek bedoel ... daardie bome se stamme is breër as wat jy is.”

“So?”

“So!” Hy gryp my arm en vou sy vingers om my gewrig. Dit is so slank dat sy vingers oor mekaar vou. “Die takke wat jy moet snoei, het 'n groter omtrek as dit.”

“Kom nou, kinders, moenie baklei nie,” sê tannie Batty liefies. “Daar is genoeg werk vir albei van julle.”

Ek trek sy vingers om my gewrig los en glimlag triomfantelik. “En genoeg

gereedskap ook.”

“Wat van my nuwe swaai?” kla Becky toe sy ons by die gereedskapskamer in volg. Ek draai net betyds om om te sien hoe Gabe na haar kyk toe hy sy hand op haar krullerige rooi hare sit. Dit is so teer en liefdevol, so ... vaderlik dat ek ’n knop in my keel kry.

“Ek sal dit later doen, liefie,” sê hy met ’n stem so sag soos ’n kat se pote. “Ek belowe.”

“En wanneer gaan jy tannie Batty se dak regmaak?” My woorde kom bitsiger uit as wat ek dit bedoel.

“Dit kan wag, Toots,” sê tannie Batty. “Die snoei van die bome kan egter nie.” Sy vat Becky se hand. “Brr. Ek kry nou koud hier buite. Kom ek en jy gaan in en bak ’n pastei vir aandete.”

Nie ek of Gabe praat ’n woord terwyl ons die gereedskap uitsorteer nie. Ek juk om aan die werk te spring, maar Gabe vat sy tyd en bestudeer eers elke saag en snoeiskêr noukeurig.

“Party van hierdie lemme lyk baie stomp,” sê hy. “Ek dink ek moet dit eers slyp.” Hy vat dit reguit in skuur toe en stap direk by Sam se werkswinkel in asof hy presies weet waarheen hy op pad is. Hy gaan sit by die slypsteen en begin die pedale trap sodat die wiel spin, asof hy dit al sy lewe lank doen.

“Het jy ook al ’n artikel geskryf oor hoe om gereedskap te slyp?” vra ek sarkasties.

Hy konsentreer so hard op waarmee hy besig is dat dit ’n hele rukkie vat voordat hy opkyk. “Wat het jy gesê?” Sy uitdrukking is die ene onskuld, of baie goeie toneelspel – ek kan nie agterkom watter een nie.

“Dit lyk of jy baie bekend is met ’n slypsteen,” sê ek.

“Ja. Sal jy omgee om vir my ’n bietjie water te bring om oor hierdie steen te gooi? Dankie.” Hy tel ’n vyl op en begin een van die sae se lemme daarmee slyp.

Terwyl ek die water gaan haal, onthou ek dat Gabe die skuur vir my skoongemaak en ’n nag in Sam se werkswinkel deurgebring het. Dit kan verduidelik hoe hy geweet het waarheen om te gaan. Waar hy egter by die slypsteen sit en werk, lyk sy hande baie vaardig vir dié van ’n stadsjapie.

Ek sien ’n pyntrek op sy gesig toe hy klaar is en hy buk af om sy beseerde been te masseer.

“Is dit weer seer?” vra ek.

“Dis nie te erg nie.”

Ek stap haastig voor hom by die skuur uit en sleep twee lere na die bakkie toe. Gabe kom net betyds met die gereedskap aan om my te help om alles agterop te laai. Ek klim agter die stuurwiel in en hy aan die passasierskant.

Die grond is steeds met sneeu bedek; daarom ry ek stadig, want ek wil nie hê die bakkie moet iewers in die sneeu vasval nie. Ek stop by die naaste lap bome, net agter die skuur. Ek sou baie vinniger tot hier geloop het, maar Gabe sou nie kon nie.

Toe ek tot stilstand kom, kyk ek af en sien die groot spasie tussen ons op die voorste sitplek. Dit laat my dink aan tannie Batty se storie en hoe Lydia haar aangeraai het om seker te maak haar bobeen skuur “per ongeluk” teen Frank s’n. Ek kry so ’n snaakse prentjie in my kop van klein tannie Batty wat tot teenaan my stywe ou skoonpa probeer skuif dat ek kliphard lag.

“Wat is so snaaks?” vra Gabe glimlaggend.

“Niks nie ... ek ... ” maar ek kan nie die prentjie uit my gedagtes kry nie. Ek weet presies hoe geskok Frank sou gewees het as sy dit regtig gedoen het, en ek lag totdat die trane oor my wange loop. Gabe wag. “Ek is jammer,” sê ek en vee my oë af. Die storie is heeltemal te ingewikkeld om te verduidelik; daarom sê ek net: “My skoonpa draai seker nou in sy graf om. Jy het geen idee hoe hy hierdie bome opgepiep het nie.”

Hy knik en klim uit die bakkie uit. Toe ek omstap na hom toe, staan hy reeds die naaste boom en bekijk. “Jou skoonpa se noukeurigheid sal ons werk maklik maak,” sê hy. “Hy het hierdie bome baie mooi gevorm. Kan jy sien hoe maklik dit is om die takke wat vrugte dra van die nuwe takke te onderskei? Ons moet hierdie takke terugsnoei.” Hy wys na ’n paar dun takke wat vanaf die stam en middelste takke in alle rigtings groei.

“Dan moet ons seker aan die werk spring.” Ek skuur verby hom en begin een van die lere afhaal. Hy staan vir my en kyk.

“Luister, Eliza ... ”

Ek kan aan sy stemtoon agterkom dat hy op die punt staan om van voor af vir my te vertel dat ek heeltemal te tingerig is om bome te snoei. Dit herinner my so baie aan my pa wat vir my vertel wat ek kan en nie kan doen nie dat ek omswaai en hom met my hande op die heupe aankyk.

“Wat, Gabe?”

Hy kyk vir ’n hele ruk na my en skud dan sy kop. “Niks nie. Ek wil jou maar net waarsku dat daardie lemme baie skerp is.”

Dit is harde werk. Ek sleep die leer van die een boom na die ander, klim ’n dosyn keer op en af, steek my hande bo my kop uit, strek en sny en saag. Ek wens die hele tyd ek het ’n oorpak aangehad in plaas van hierdie irriterende ou romp wat elke vyf minute in my pad is. Teen middagete is my tone so koud dat ek hulle nie meer kan voel nie.

Die bome het geen einde nie – ry ná ry van hulle, perfek gespasieer in reguit rye. Ek onthou Sam het my eenkeer vertel sy pa het honderd bome per

akker geplant – en daar is akkers en akkers van hulle. Teen die einde van die dag is my bene en skouers en nek so seer dat ek wil huil, maar ek moet môre nog bome snoei. Ek is bereid om ’n weddenskap aan te gaan dat Gabe ook seer het, maar ons albei is heeltemal te hardkoppig om dit te erken.

Op die derde of vierde dag van werk, bring Gabe sy weermag-veldfles saam. Ten spyte van tannie Batty se ontkenning, vermoed ek steeds dat hy Matthew Wyatt is. Toe hy dus op die bakkie se agterkap gaan sit om daaruit te drink, besluit ek om hom uit te vra oor die oorlog.

“Ek sien jy het ’n klein aandenking van die weermag af teruggebring,” sê ek. “Het jy in die Groot Oorlog geveg?”

Hy vat ’n groot sluk en vee sy mond af voordat hy antwoord. “Ek het hierdie fles by ’n boemelaar met die naam Loony Lou gekry. Die aand toe ek hom ontmoet het, was hy ’n baie siek man. Te oordeel na die manier waarop hy gehoes het, het ek vermoed dat hy longontsteking het. Ek het toe ’n paar dae by hom gebly, hom gevoer, hom warm gehou, hom hard en goed op die rug geklop wanneer hy dit nodig gehad het. Hy is byna dood, maar toe hy uiteindelik beter geword het, het hy daarop aangedring dat ek hierdie fles hou as sy manier om dankie te sê. Dit is die enigste waardevolle besitting wat hy gehad het.” Gabe staan op en hou dit na my toe uit. “Wil jy ’n slukkie hê?”

“Nee dankie.” Ek is self ’n kenner wanneer dit by die vertel van leuens kom; dus behoort ek in staat te wees om maklik een uit te ken. Sy storie klink egter vir my na die waarheid.

Gabe is reeds weer met die leer op voordat ek besef hy het netjies my vraag vermy en nog nie gesê of hy in die oorlog geveg het of nie.

Ongeag hoe hard ons werk, dit lyk of daar altyd nog bome is wat tot in die ewigheid strek. Solank dit nie te winderig of koud is nie, werk ons elke dag van vroeg tot laat. Ek val elke aand uitgeput in my bed neer en droom van bome met takke wat soos maer arms na my toe uitreik en my probeer gryp en verwurg. Ek skrik dan wakker in ’n koue sweet, dankbaar dat dit net ’n droom was – totdat ek onthou dat ek die volgende dag steeds meer bome moet snoei.

“Jy hoef nie so hard te werk nie, Gabe,” sê ek een middag vir hom. Hy het vir die derde keer op die bakkie se agterkap gaan sit om ’n bietjie te rus. Hy lyk vir my ’n bietjie bleek.

“Ek probeer maar net by jou byhou,” sê hy en glimlag flou.

“Jy word nie weer koorsig nie, nè?” Ek trek my handskoen uit en voel aan sy voorkop. Hy voel koel. Toe ek besef wat ek sopas gedoen het, draai ek verleë weg. Ek kyk na die lang ry bome wat ons klaar gesnoei het, die hope takke wat daaronder lê, en dan na die lang ry wat ons nog moet snoei. Toe ek dit uiteindelik waag om na Gabe te kyk, staar hy na my met ’n vreemde

uitdrukking op sy gesig, asof hy my nog nooit voorheen gesien het nie.

“Wat? Hoekom kyk jy so na my?” vra ek.

Hy bloos. “Ek ... Dis niks nie. Ek bewonder jou maar net. Jy is ’n ongelooflike vrou.” Hy lig die fles na sy lippe en vat ’n sluk. “Hoe lank probeer jy al hierdie boord op jou eie versorg?”

“Net ’n paar maande. Dis net vandat my skoonpa verlede November oorlede is.”

“Waaraan is hy dood?”

“Hy het dood neergeval ná ’n hartaanval. Die dokter sê hy was binne minute weg. Hy was ten minste beleefd genoeg om te wag tot die oes afgehandel is.”

“En jou man?”

“Hy is so ’n bietjie meer as ’n jaar voor sy pa dood.”

“Luister, ek weet dit het eintlik niks met my te doen nie, maar hoekom huur jy nie hulp nie? Daar is baie mans daarbuite wat werk soek.”

“Ek kan dit nie bekostig nie. My skoonpa het skuld gehad.”

Hy vat nog ’n sluk. “Dink jy regtig jy kan hierdie plek heeltemal op jou eie hanteer?” Hy kon netsowel olie op vuur gegooi het, so vinnig vlam my humeur op.

“Ek kan nie vir jou sê hoe siek ek daarvoor is dat almal my dié vraag vra nie. Elke keer wanneer ek daardie woorde hoor, maak dit my net meer vasbeslote om vas te byt. Dit is my huis. My kinders se huis. Niks en niemand gaan ons ooit dwing om hier weg te gaan nie. Ek doen dinge dalk nie soos Frank Wyatt dit gedoen het nie, maar hierdie is die enigste huis wat ek nog ooit gehad het en, die Here help my, ek sal nooit weer haweloos wees nie.”

Gabe sit ná my uitbarsting vir my en kyk soos ’n hond met sy stert tussen sy bene. Ek vra vinnig om verskoning. “Jammer. Ek wou nie skree nie.”

“Dis oukei,” sê hy sag. “Ek weet ook hoe dit voel om haweloos te wees.”

My hart versag ’n klein bietjie. “Praat jy nou van die afgelope paar maande?”

“Nie net dit nie.” Hy vroetel met die fles se prop en probeer dit reg toeskroef. “Ek het regtig nie ’n plek wat ek my huis kan noem nie. Voordat ek met my reise begin het, het ek in Chicago in ’n losieshuis gebly.”

“Het jy nie ’n familie nie?”

“Nee.”

My hart versag nog meer. Ek wil vir hom vra wat van sy mense geword het, maar ek weet as hy vir my dieselfde sou vra, sal ek hom nie antwoord nie. In elk geval, as hy Matthew Wyatt is, ken ek reeds die antwoord. Gabe staan op en strek sy arms en skouers, draai sy kop in ’n sirkel om die styfheid uit sy



nek te kry.

“Ek dink ek weet presies hoe seer jou lyf is,” sê ek sag.

Hy glimlag stadig, sagkens vir my. “Ja. Ek is seker jy weet.”

Ons albei kyk gelyktydig weg, asof ons besef dat ons te veel omtrent onself onthul het.

“Wel, ons moet seker weer aan die werk spring,” sê ek en kyk na die ry bome voor ons.

“Wat van al die takke wat onder die bome lê?” vra hy en kyk na die dele waarmee ons klaar is.

“Ek weet nie wat om met dit alles te doen nie, maar ek weet dit kan nie daar bly nie. Ek onthou Sam het my eenkeer vertel dat dooie hout insekte lok. Hy het altyd die groot hooihark tussen die rye deur gesleep sodat hy al die takke aan die een punt bymekaar kon maak.”

“Kan ons nie van die groter stukke vir vuurmaakhout gebruik nie?”

Die manier waarop Gabe “ons” sê, gee my ’n vreemde gevoel. Ek kan nie besluit of dit ’n tevrede gevoel of ’n ergerlike een is nie. “Ja, sodra dit droog is,” sê ek. “Tog is daar heeltemal te veel daarvan.”

“Ek wonder ... Jy weet mos dat die boemelaars soms langs die treinspoor kamp. Ek dink party van hulle sal bereid wees om die hout vir ons bymekaar te maak en dit weg te ry as ons dit vir hulle gee om mee vuur te maak.”

Hy sê dit weer – óns.

“Nou goed,” sê ek na ’n rukkie. “Maak net seker jy sê vir hulle om op my eiendom te kamp, aan hierdie kant van die treinspoor. Die ander kant behoort aan Alvin Greer en hy sal die polisie laat kom om hulle weg te jaag.”

Daardie aand laat ek vir Gabe met die bakkie ry. Hy laai dit vol hout en vat die eerste vrag af na die kruising by die treinspoor sodat sy vriende dit kan gebruik. In die weke wat volg, sien ek mense rondom aandete deur die boord beweeg om armsvol takke bymekaar te maak – jammerlike mans en soms vroue, geklee in vormlose en stukkende klere. Een of twee van hulle lyk nie juis ouer as Jimmy nie. Hulle is haweloos, honger, koud.

Elke aand wanneer ek aansit by ’n ete wat tannie Batty gekook het, bid ek dat my kinders nie soos hulle sal opeindig nie.

## CHAPTER TEN

**T**here are only a few more acres of trees left to trim,” I told Gabe one morning as we loaded the truck. “Why don’t you get started on Aunt Batty’s roof today, and I’ll finish trimming them myself.” Gabe had already taken a good look at the damage and had given Aunt Batty a list of the supplies he would need from the lumberyard. I had no idea if she could afford them or how she would pay for them, but I had enough worries of my own as spring approached without taking on hers.

“Well, let’s think about this a minute,” Gabe said slowly. I could hear the hesitation in his voice.

“Is there something wrong with my idea?” I asked impatiently.

“I don’t like you working all alone out there, so far away from the house. If something should happen—”

“Like what?”

“Well...you could fall off the ladder—”

“I haven’t fallen yet, have I? Besides, you could fall off the ladder down at Aunt Batty’s house, too. What’s the difference?” I dared him to imply that I was a helpless woman, but he had sense enough not to. He carefully examined a saw blade before tossing it in with the others.

“How about if I keep working on the trees,” he finally said, “and you can drive Aunt Batty into town for the supplies.”

“I don’t know one piece of lumber from the next,” I said. “It would be easier if you drove her into town.”

He wouldn’t meet my gaze. “I’d rather not.”

“Why?”

“It’s not my truck. It’s yours.” He turned away a little too quickly. I couldn’t see his face but I got the feeling there was another reason why he didn’t want to go. After all, he’d driven my truck once before down to the hobo camp. Besides, he could always hitch the horses to a wagon instead of taking the truck. As I watched him limp over to close the door to the tool shed, still leaning on Walter Gibson’s cane, I tried to work out what the real explanation might be. Far as I could tell, Gabe had no reason at all to avoid Deer Springs—unless he was afraid folks might recognize him as Matthew Wyatt. And if he *was* Matthew, the joke was on him because *he* owned the truck, not me!

“I wouldn’t mind a lift out to that last section of trees before you head into town,” he said when he’d hobbled back to the pickup.

I don’t know which annoyed me more—the fact that Gabe was hiding something, or the fact that he’d been making all the decisions lately. Two weeks ago he had moved back out to the workshop to sleep, telling Aunt Batty she could have the spare room downstairs. Then he’d started getting the cold frames ready for planting and sharpening the plow blades without being asked. Last night I found him tinkering with the tractor. You would have thought he could hear my father-in-law’s voice, plain as day, ordering him around like he used to order Sam: “*Son, it’s time to do such-and-such...Son, you need to fix the thing-a-ma-jig.*”

In the end, I drove Aunt Batty to the lumberyard. I had extra eggs and milk to sell, and I wanted to stop by Mr. Wakefield’s office while I was in town and see if he’d had any luck tracking down Matthew. Judging by the sleepy, confused look on the old lawyer’s face, he might have been sound asleep at his desk since the last time I was there.

“Sorry, Eliza. I haven’t heard a thing about Matthew. Sorry...I wrote to Washington but these things take time. Sorry...”

“That’s all right, Mr. Wakefield.” He looked so pitiful I had the urge

to pat him like a baby until he fell back to sleep.

Aunt Batty and Becky were sitting in the truck waiting for me by the time I walked back to the lumberyard. The wood, tar paper, and shingles were all loaded and ready to go. Lord knows how she paid for them.

For the next few weeks Gabe was everywhere at once, working like a house-a-fire. He would rise before dawn to do chores, then he'd work on Aunt Batty's roof for a while, then he'd putter around the barn or the orchard, getting everything ready for springtime. I almost never had to nag the boys to do chores as long as Gabe worked alongside them. But the very thing I'd feared—that they would grow attached to Gabe—was slowly happening, and I didn't know what to do about it. Try as I might, I couldn't keep my kids from sneaking out to the barn and hanging around him every time I turned my back. Luke, especially, had taken a shine to him, and it amazed me to hear the boy actually talking to Gabe—although they both spoke so softly I could never understand anything either of them said. Whatever they were discussing, Gabe seemed very patient with Luke's stuttering and all.

Gabe won Becky's heart when he made her the swing like he'd promised. She danced in circles around Aunt Batty and me as we watched him hang it from a limb of the old oak tree in front of the house.

"Lydia's boys used to have a swing on this very same tree," Aunt Batty said. "In fact, they might have hung it from that very same branch."

"You're right, they did," Gabe said.

I looked up at him in surprise as he climbed out on the limb to tie the ropes. Had he just given himself away?

"How do you know where their swing was?" I asked him.

"I found some remnants of the old rope still embedded in the bark

up here.” He prodded at the wood with his finger, dusting us with bits of rotting hemp. “See? Twenty-year-old rope.”

It was the same with everything he did—Gabe seemed so at home on my farm, it was as if he’d lived here his whole life. He plowed the field where we always had our vegetable garden and started slips in the cold frame. He fixed nesting boxes in the chicken coop so the hens would set and strung up new chicken wire so the hawks wouldn’t take the baby chicks. He oiled and sharpened and repaired all the tools and equipment as if they belonged to him. And he kept the inside of the barn as neat as a pin, just the way Frank always insisted it be kept.

“You seem to know an awful lot about running a farm,” I told him one day at lunchtime. “Did you grow up on one?”

“I spent a couple of summers on my aunt and uncle’s farm.”

He didn’t look up from his plate when he spoke. I could tell he hated answering my questions. If he had been a turtle he would have retreated inside his shell. I understood how he felt. I did the same thing whenever people started asking me about my past, but that didn’t stop me from questioning Gabe.

“Where was their farm?”

“Out east.”

“Really? Which state?”

“New York.” He avoided my next question by turning to Aunt Batty. “If you don’t mind, I’ll need you to come down to the cottage tomorrow morning and tell me how you want a few things done.”

“All right. How’s my roof coming, by the way?” she asked.

“The work is going pretty well. All this rain we’ve had has slowed me down, though.”

“I’m not in a hurry,” she said. “And the rain is good for the apple trees.”

It occurred to me that I wasn’t in a hurry for Gabe to finish, either. Once he repaired the roof he would probably go home to Chicago. The

thought of getting by without his help gave me a panicky feeling. I remembered Aunt Batty saying she'd been unprepared for the day Walter Gibson had left her, and I decided I'd better get used to the idea of Gabe leaving before it took me by surprise.

"You know, Gabe," I said as I refilled his coffee cup, "you've paid me back a dozen times over for doctoring your leg. You're free to leave whenever you need to go."

He didn't reply but I felt his eyes on me. When I finally looked at him he said, "A man's life is a very big debt to repay." He had dangerous eyes—mysterious and dark. I couldn't look into them for very long without feeling like I was falling off the edge of the world. Their softness pulled me toward him, yet the pain I saw in them pushed me away at the same time.

"What about your job with the newspaper?" I asked. "Shouldn't you be getting back to work one of these days?"

"I'm not sure I still have a job. I gave my editor this address when I sent in my story. I'm still waiting to hear from him."

I knew how good Gabe's hobo story was, and I wondered how much money the newspaper would pay him for it. Enough to settle Frank Wyatt's loan at the bank? When I looked at the calendar this morning I realized that half of the ninety days Mr. Preston had given me had already passed. I'd saved every cent I'd earned from selling our extra eggs and milk in town, but I knew that it wasn't going to be enough. Time was running out, and I still had no idea where the money would come from.

Alvin Greer must have realized the time had grown short, too, because he paid me a visit that very afternoon. I heard a car pull into my lane, and when I saw that it was Mr. Greer, I put on my coat and went out onto the back porch to talk to him. I knew it would be neighborly to invite him inside, but I didn't want him in my parlor again, eyeing everything like he couldn't wait to get his hands on all

of it.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Wyatt,” he said, tipping his hat.

“Good afternoon.” I folded my arms across my chest and waited. It didn’t take him long to get the hint and come to the point.

“Are you aware that a gang of hobos has been camping on your property down by the tracks?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Would you like me to run them off for you?”

“No, I told them they may camp there. They have no place else to go.”

He gave me a stern look. “Do you think that’s wise? I mean, you’re here all alone with three small children.”

“It’s the Christian thing to do, isn’t it, Mr. Greer? Doesn’t the Good Book say whatever we do for one of the least of our brethren we do for the Lord?”

Mr. Greer was trying to hold back his temper as if he had an excited dog on a very short leash. “I didn’t come here to discuss the Good Book—”

“Why did you come here?”

“Well, I got a letter a few weeks back from Mr. Wakefield, your attorney, saying you couldn’t take me up on my offer to buy this place until he’d settled Frank Wyatt’s estate. Now I know these things take time, so I wondered if you could use some help in the meantime?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Greer. I already have help.”

He blinked in disbelief. “You do?”

It occurred to me that Alvin Greer might recognize Matthew Wyatt so I decided to introduce him to Gabe.

“Yes, sir. My husband’s Aunt Betty has moved in with the children and me to help us out,” I explained. “And I took on a manager to handle the orchard. He’s working out in the barn if you’d like to meet him.” I turned and led the way without waiting for Mr. Greer to reply.

Gabe stepped through the door just as we arrived. “There you are,” I said. “I’d like you to meet my neighbor to the north. This is Mr. Alvin Greer.” I purposely neglected to introduce Gabe by name, waiting to see how he would introduce himself. Gabe removed his glove and held his hand out to Greer.

“Gabe Harper. How do you do?”

I watched Greer’s face, waiting for the moment of recognition. It never came. The men exchanged a few pleasantries, but it was quite clear that Greer was suddenly in a big hurry to leave. He had called on me today expecting to find a damsel in distress, and he’d cast himself in the role of my knight in shining armor. The fact that I didn’t need his help, that he wasn’t going to get his hands on Wyatt Orchards, had lit the fuse on his temper and he needed to leave before it exploded.

“What’s wrong with him?” Gabe asked as Greer’s car spun out of my driveway.

“I told him you were my manager.”

“He has a problem with that?”

“He wants my orchard. He’s just licking his chops, waiting for me to fail so he can take over.”

“What right would he have to take over your orchard?” Gabe asked. He looked peeved as he watched Greer’s car drive away.

“His wife used to be a Wyatt. He figures she’s entitled to it as a blood relation and I’m not.”

The very next day Dan Foster, the county sheriff, came to pay me a visit. He was a formidable-looking man in his late fifties and as burly and barrel-chested as a prize fighter. He wore a crisp brown uniform with a shiny brass badge pinned on it, and a pistol strapped on his hip. I’d always pitied any criminal who crossed Sheriff Foster’s path. When I saw him climbing out of his car I thought maybe he’d brought news of Matthew, so I hurried outside to invite him in.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Wyatt,” he said, tipping his hat. “It isn’t you



I've come to see. Alvin Greer tells me you've hired a manager and I'd like a word with him, if I may."

I stared at him dumbly. Then I recalled Aunt Batty saying that Sheriff Foster's wife was also a Wyatt and I knew they had ganged up on me.

"Why? What's this all about, Sheriff?"

"Alvin tells me the fellow's a stranger and I—"

"What business is it of yours if I hire a stranger? Don't you have anything better to do than run around to every farm in the county and check out their hired hands?" I thought he might get riled but he didn't.

"We're your neighbors, Eliza. We all understand how hard it must be with your menfolk gone. But why not ask your neighbors for help, first?" He spoke kindly and I was a little sorry for being so suspicious of him, but I just couldn't help it.

"I know you think it's your job to protect me from strangers, but I can take care of myself, Sheriff. It's none of your business who I hire. Besides, for all you know, the man is kin to me."

"Believe me, it would ease my mind a great deal if that were true." He watched me closely, waiting for me to confirm it, his hand resting casually on his gun. I didn't have the nerve to lie to him. He finally cleared his throat and said, "I've known Frank Wyatt all my life, and I can remember when your husband, Sam, stood only this high. It's for their sakes that I'm stopping by. I'm very concerned for you and the kids, ma'am. And it is my job as county sheriff to protect law-abiding citizens from dangerous vagrants and con artists."

"Thank you, but I can assure you that he's neither one."

"I'll still need to talk to him, ma'am." He reached inside his jacket and drew out an envelope. "This letter came from Chicago by registered mail for a Mr. Gabriel Harper, at this address. Bill White down at the post office asked me if I knew anything about it, and I

said I'd deliver it to Mr. Harper myself since I'd planned on driving out anyway."

I don't know why I felt so protective of Gabe, but I did. He had secrets in his past that he didn't want me or anyone else to know about, but he couldn't possibly be a dangerous fugitive or anything, could he? Gabe was so gentle and soft-spoken I honestly didn't think he was capable of breaking the law. So why was I reluctant to hand Gabe over to him? Sheriff Foster might even recognize him as Matthew Wyatt—wasn't that what I wanted? I felt very confused.

"He's working down at Aunt Betty's house this morning," I finally said. "I'll be glad to go get him—" "Thanks, but I know how to get to Betty Fowler's cottage." He climbed back into his car and drove off.

I wanted to go down there and hear what the sheriff and Gabe had to say to each other, but I would have to rely on Aunt Batty's report. I asked her about their meeting that afternoon as I mixed up a batch of bread dough. We seemed to be eating bread faster than I could bake it lately. Aunt Batty was in the kitchen with me, giving the pantry a good spring cleaning now that Queen Esther had finally rid it of mice.

"That Dan Foster was being downright nosy," she told me. She wrung out her cleaning rag as if it were the sheriff's neck. "He questioned poor Gabe as if he were wanted for murder, asking where he'd lived previously and where he'd worked—he even had the gall to ask him for a list of references. Dan can be a real bully when he wants to be—which is a good thing, I suppose, when you're dealing with criminals."

"What did Gabe say?"

"He may be a quiet man, but he wouldn't let Dan bully him. He said his name was Gabriel Harper, he lived in Chicago, and that any business he had with Wyatt Orchards was none of Dan's. I cheered him on. I said, 'Good for you, Gabe!' and that got Dan all worked up. He said this happens to be a private conversation and he asked me to

leave, and I said this happens to be my house, maybe he ought to leave! Things went downhill fast after that.”

I smiled as I turned the dough out of the mixing bowl and began kneading it. “I’m sorry I missed it,” I said.

“Oh, it was great fun! Dan was mouthing threats by the time he pulled out of there. He vowed to check up on Gabe, and he swore that if he found out Gabe was taking advantage of a defenseless widow there would be ‘you-know-what’ to pay.”

Aunt Batty disappeared into the pantry again and I heard her banging things around in there. I was a little disappointed that I hadn’t learned anything new about Gabe, yet like Aunt Batty, I couldn’t help but cheer him on.

“What about the letter the sheriff had for Gabe?” I asked, suddenly remembering it.

Aunt Batty stuck her fluffy head out of the pantry. She had a big grin spread across her face. “That was wonderful news! Gabe’s story is going to be serialized in the Chicago newspaper!”

My hands froze on the dough. “So now he’ll probably leave us.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Toots. Gabe has a stubborn streak a mile long. I saw that for myself today. The sheriff tried to run him off and that just made Gabe dig in his heels all the more. You told folks he’s your manager and by golly, from now on Gabe is going to manage Wyatt Orchards!”

I covered my face with floury hands and wept with relief. I hadn’t realized how much I dreaded the thought of being on my own again. I had come to rely on Gabe more than I cared to admit. Aunt Batty laid down her cleaning rag and wrapped her arms tightly around me.

“You poor little thing,” she soothed. “You’ve been carrying a mighty heavy burden, haven’t you? But you don’t have to worry anymore because God sent you a guardian angel to help you out for a little while.”

I wiped my eyes and bent to rest my head on her shoulder. "I think He sent me two angels."

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One cold, rainy morning I noticed one of our cows acting funny. My father-in-law had taken her to be bred last summer and I figured she must be about to calve. But unlike the other three cows who'd always known what to do when their time came, Myrtle was a first-time mother and I could see she was having trouble. Afraid to leave her for very long, I dashed back to the house through the rain to get help. Becky and Aunt Batty were in the kitchen getting a new batch of eggs ready to take into town to sell.

"Is Gabe still working down at your house?" I asked her.

"Yes, he's working on the inside today on account of the rain."

"Becky, I need you to run and get him," I said. "Put on Luke's old galoshes and take my umbrella. Tell him Myrtle's having trouble calving and I could use his help."

"Don't bother sending her for Gabe," Aunt Batty said, reaching out to hold Becky back. "He won't be any help. He hardly knows which end of the cow to point toward the feeding trough. I like Gabe a lot, but..." she lowered her voice to a whisper, "he doesn't know what he's doing."

"What do you mean? He does all kinds of things for me around the farm."

"Mind you, he's getting better at it every day," she said, wiping off another egg. "But when Gabe first started helping out with the chores, Jimmy could milk two cows in the time it took Gabe to milk one—and that was only after he got over his fear of being kicked."

I still wanted to believe Gabe was Matthew Wyatt. If so, he would have left home some time ago and might have forgotten a lot of things by now. "Maybe he's just out of practice," I said. "He lived in the city

for a long time, you know.”

“I would bet he’s lived in the city all his life! That young man never grew up on any farm!” She dropped her voice to a whisper again and added, “He comes to me for advice.”

“Advice about what?”

“Everything!” she said with a shrug. “When to start the hot bed, how to get the chickens to set, when to plow the garden, how the manure spreader works...The horses spooked him pretty badly at first. I suppose because they’re so big. He said he’d never owned a horse in Chicago—just cars. I told him you have to let a horse know who’s boss, and he laughed and said they already know they are! He’s much better with them now and hardly ever gets their harnesses on backward anymore. But yesterday morning I told him that the raspberry canes Frank started last fall were ready to be clipped and he had no idea what I was talking about.”

“Neither do I and I’ve lived here ten years. How long has Frank raised raspberries?”

“As far back as I can remember,” she said, examining another egg. “Lydia knew how much I loved raspberries so she always let me pick my fill every year. I had to buy them after she died. They weren’t nearly as good, you know. You have to eat raspberries the same day you pick them or all they’ll be good for is jam and—”

“Listen, what should I do about the cow?” I hated interrupting her, but Aunt Batty’s thoughts could take more twists and turns than a circus’ rubber lady. Do you know anything about birthing calves?”

“Most of the cows I’ve owned managed fine on their own. Although I do remember a time or two when Father had to turn a calf. I would haul hot water for him and things like that, but I was always too small to be much help. It takes a man’s strength.”

“Will you come out to the barn and take a look at Myrtle for me?”

“Sure, Toots.”

But after watching the cow closely all morning, it was clear to both of us that she was in trouble.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to help Myrtle out," Aunt Batty told Gabe when he walked up the hill for lunch. "We don't want to lose her or her calf."

"Sure," he said, blowing on his soup to cool it. "What do you want me to do?"

Aunt Batty winced. "I'd better let you finish your lunch before I spell out the unpleasant details." She laughed when he suddenly stopped eating, his spoon poised midair. "Have you ever watched the birthing process before?" she asked him.

"Um...my uncle's dog had puppies one summer," he said. "And it seems as though Arabella has a new 'kitten' or two every time I turn around." He looked at Becky and winked.

*Don't do that*, I wanted to shout at him. *Don't make my children love you, then walk out of their lives!* But it was already much too late for any warnings. I could tell by the way Becky took Gabe's hand as we walked out to the barn after lunch that she thought the world of him. He carried a bucket of hot water in the other hand. He still limped slightly, but he no longer needed the cane.

Poor Myrtle bellowed in misery. Aunt Batty took charge. "Let's get her into the smallest stall so she can't move around so much. Eliza and I will try to hold her still while you turn the calf. Soap up your arm, Gabe."

He looked horrified. "You don't mean..."

"I'm afraid so. You'll have to take your coat off. And make sure you wash clear past your elbow."

Gabe didn't move. I felt so sorry for him that I was about to swallow my pride and drive over to ask Alvin Greer for help. But suddenly Gabe sighed in resignation and shrugged off his coat.

"I wonder if the *Tribune* will be interested in an article about this?"

he said as he lathered up.

“Now, Myrtle is not going to like this...” Aunt Batty warned when he was ready.

“I don’t think I’m going to like it much, either,” he mumbled.

“So mind she doesn’t kick you. Watch her rear hooves.”

“They won’t be easy to dodge, considering where I’ll be standing. But thanks for the warning.” He took a couple of deep breaths, as if he were about to dive under water, then asked, “What am I looking for again?”

“The calf’s head. Once you figure out which end is which, feel your way down from her head to her shoulder or her front leg and try to turn her around. My guess is, the calf is facing the wrong way.”

“Why do I have the feeling that it sounds easier to describe it than to do it?” he joked. He stepped up to the cow and patted her rump gingerly, wary of her hind legs.

“Talk to Myrtle, Eliza,” Aunt Batty coached. “Say soothing things to her.”

I stood near the cow’s head. I stroked her muzzle and talked to her the way I talked to the kids when they were sick, telling her everything would be fine. But thinking back on my own experiences with childbirth, I wouldn’t have blamed Myrtle if she hauled off and kicked me, too.

Gabe had finally gotten up the nerve to do what he needed to do. But he wasn’t inside more than twenty seconds before he let out a yell and his face contorted with pain.

“Oh, I’ll bet she’s having a labor pain,” Aunt Batty said. “I forgot to mention those. She’ll have one from time to time, and my father said they just about squeeze the life out of your arm.”

“He wasn’t joking!” Gabe groaned. He went limp for a moment when it finally ended but he didn’t quit. He and Myrtle continued to struggle for what seemed like hours and hours. He found the calf’s

head, lost it, found it again, then began the slow, arduous task of turning it around—in between the cow's labor pains. I thought he would be cold without his coat on, but he worked so hard that sweat poured down his face and plastered his dark hair to his forehead. When he thought he finally had the calf in the right position, Aunt Batty told him to step back and let Myrtle finish.

Within minutes, she gave birth to a beautiful new calf. I saw pure joy on Gabe's face as we all witnessed the miracle of birth. Then tears rolled down my own face as I watched the newborn struggle to stand on wobbly legs for the first time. Aunt Batty and Becky held hands and danced in circles right there in the barn.

"Thank you! Thank you!" I wept as I hugged Gabe. We clung to each other tightly, overwhelmed with emotion. A moment later I hugged Aunt Batty and Becky, too, but even as I did, I was keenly aware that it wasn't the same. I didn't have the same, powerful emotions flooding through me the way they had as I'd held Gabe—and that scared me.

"Myrtle's new calf needs a name," Gabe said as he lifted Becky into his arms.

"Angel," she said without hesitation. "Let's name her Angel."

"All right, Angel it is!"

That night as I tossed in bed, I couldn't erase the memory of Gabe's embrace from my heart. Was I falling under his spell like Becky Jean had? I'd never fallen in love before, so these sensations were all brand-new to me. Still, I could easily imagine it happening to Gabe and me in the same slow, sure way Aunt Batty had fallen in love with Walter Gibson.

A wiser part of me knew I had to prevent it from happening. Walter Gibson had returned to Chicago, and this very afternoon Gabe had talked about writing an article for his newspaper as if he planned to return to Chicago, too. He wouldn't stay on the farm—Aunt Batty



insisted that he knew nothing about farming.

I couldn't risk falling in love with him. I couldn't.

But how did I stop it?

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I worked awfully hard that spring, doing a man's labor every day. I had to learn how to do everything—and I'd be doing it for the rest of my life if I wanted to hang on to the orchard. I could tell that Gabe didn't much like me shoveling manure and slogging the team of horses through rain and mud, but it took the two of us working together just to get all the spring chores done. Now that the snow had melted it was time to start fertilizing the trees. Aunt Batty watched Becky for me and did all the cooking and other household chores while I worked outside. Those two had become thick as thieves.

In spite of what Aunt Batty said, I never saw one single sign that Gabe didn't know what he was doing. Was he putting on an act for her sake, so she wouldn't recognize him? Or for mine?

As time passed, I became more and more frightened by the easy familiarity that was developing between Gabe and me. Our closeness grew stronger as we worked side by side, discussing things and making decisions. I'd never had a relationship like that with anyone before, not even with my husband, Sam. He had worked with his father all day while I'd had my own household chores to do. But Gabe and I had gotten so we could anticipate what each other needed. We'd be ready to hand over a tool or turn the horses around before the other person even had a chance to ask. We worked like a pair of trapeze artists, performing smoothly together in perfect rhythm, one ready to catch the other at exactly the right moment. Like I said, it scared me to death.

When it was time to harvest the asparagus, I decided to have our whole family pick it instead of hiring help. That way all the money we

made could go toward the mortgage. Jimmy and Luke were thrilled to miss a day or two of school—until they found out how hard they had to work.

I used the wagon and a team of horses to take the crop to the fruit exchange. It was slow going, but it saved me a little money on gasoline. I asked Gabe to come with me since I'd never sold anything at the fruit exchange before, and I was afraid they'd take advantage of me because I was a woman. I thought he might refuse since he'd always given me a pile of excuses why he couldn't go into town, but this time he didn't.

We had harvested a beautiful crop, and quiet, gentle Gabe stood his ground with all the buyers, arguing back and forth with them like a big-city lawyer until we got the best possible price. But when I counted everything up, I still didn't have nearly enough money to pay off the bank loan.

Afterward we went to the feed store. I had to spend some of my egg and milk money for onion sets and garden seeds and all the other things we needed for spring planting. When I told Becky to go pick out the feed sacks she wanted me to buy, Gabe looked so perplexed I knew he wasn't acting.

"Are you an authority on chicken feed, now?" he asked her, ruffling her red curls.

"No, silly. It's for my *clothes*," she said. "Mama always sews me new ones with the cloth. Which sack do you think is the prettiest?"

"Don't ask me!" he said, holding up his hands in protest.

"High fashion has never been my area of expertise."

"Birthing calves wasn't either," I teased, "but you did just fine with that."

Gabe laughed as he backed away from us. "I'd sooner birth a whole herd of calves than help ladies shop for clothes, believe me! I'll wait for you outside."

In the end, Becky picked a yellow print with orange flowers that was so sunshiny-bright I wondered if Aunt Batty was having a bad influence on her taste. Aunt Batty had stayed home that day, but she'd smiled mischievously as she'd waved good-bye to us, saying, "Maybe I'll have a little surprise—or two—when you get back."

We'd hardly drawn the team to a halt beside the barn before Becky hopped down and ran up to Aunt Batty asking, "Where's the surprise? Can I see the surprise now?"

Aunt Batty led us all into the barn as if leading a parade down Main Street. There in the corner, rooting around in their pen, were two new baby piglets. Becky squealed with delight as she scrambled over the gate.

"You might have to bottle-feed them for a while until they get used to being without their mama," Aunt Batty told her. But my daughter was already cradling one of them in her arms like a baby and rocking it to sleep, so I knew the idea thrilled her. What worried me was where the piglets had come from, and how much they'd cost, and how I was going to pay for them. My father-in-law had always bought a few pigs to raise each spring, but I figured we would have to do without this year.

"How...? Where...?" I stammered. "I can't pay—"

"Don't you worry about any of that," Aunt Batty said with a smile. "We have to have ham and bacon, don't we?"

We had to have spray for the fruit trees, too, and I wished I didn't have to worry about how I would pay for that—but I did. I had studied my father-in-law's receipts and record books trying to figure out what to buy and how much I would need. Near as I could tell, he had always bought the spray ingredients on credit and paid it back when he sold the crop. But when I went into town to place my order at Peterson's store, Merle Peterson had changed his tune.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wyatt, but Frank had an established line of credit

with us and you don't. I'll need to see some proof that your own credit is good before I can extend you a line."

"That's ridiculous! My credit record is exactly the same as his! We both own Wyatt Orchards." As soon as I'd said the words I remembered that they weren't true. I didn't own Wyatt Orchards; Matthew did. This was one lie that Mr. Peterson could sniff out very easily. I held my breath, waiting for him to demand proof.

"Even if the deed is in your name, ma'am, I would be extending credit based on your future crop—and since you have no farming experience, I have no way of knowing whether or not you'll be able to bring in a decent harvest all by yourself."

I forced myself not to cry—or lose my temper. "I'm not all by myself. I've hired a manager. Would you like to speak with him?"

"Sure. If he comes highly recommended from some other established orchard it would certainly count in your favor."

He'd cornered me again. It sounded like Merle had talked to Sheriff Foster. I had to find some way out of this. Maybe I could fake a letter of recommendation for Gabe. But if all my problems were God's punishment on me for lying, I would surely wind up in worse trouble if I kept on doing it. My sin had me up a tree and I couldn't figure out how to climb down.

"What if I promise you a share of my crop?" I asked.

"That's what a line of credit amounts to, ma'am." He was losing patience with me. He sifted through the litter of papers by his cash register as if he had important business to tend to and I was keeping him from it. I thought about my kids and decided to beg.

"Please, Mr. Peterson, I know my manager and I are going to bring in an excellent harvest this year, but even if we don't, you know how valuable Wyatt Orchard's assets are. You could take our cows or the horses or some of our equipment and easily pay yourself back if it comes to that."

“Not in these hard times, ma’am. Entire farms are selling for pennies an acre, and farm equipment is a dime a dozen.”

He was right. Mr. Wakefield had warned me that I probably wouldn’t get much if I auctioned off Frank’s equipment. Besides, I needed that equipment to run the farm.

“Mr. Peterson, how long have you done business with Wyatt Orchards?” I asked.

“Years and years,” he replied without looking up. “My father did business with your father-in-law before you and I were even born.”

“Then if you’ve known our family all your life, isn’t that recommendation enough? You attend the same church we do. You probably grew up with my Sam and his brother Matthew. Your kids go to school with mine. Doesn’t any of that count toward my line of credit? Can’t you please find it in your heart to help us out? I’ll bet if you shook your family tree hard enough a Wyatt relation would fall to the ground.”

He looked up in surprise, then an angry glare froze on his face. “I don’t have to shake hard at all. My father and Frank were cousins. I don’t know how he did it, but Frank cheated my father out of his rightful share!”

I’d played the wrong card and lost the hand.

I’d once heard a sermon in a Lutheran church in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, about how the sins of the fathers were visited upon their children for two or three generations. I was so afraid that my daddy’s sins were going to drive up in a wagon some day and pay me an unwelcome visit that I asked Daddy about it as soon as he picked me up from church that day. He looked real uneasy when I told him what the pastor had said, but my daddy never was much good at answering any of my questions.

“Just do what the Good Book says, Eliza,” he’d mumbled. “You can’t go wrong if you do what the Good Book says.” But for a long

time afterward, I couldn't get the preacher's warning out of my head. I pictured it like a ghoulish family reunion in a cemetery somewhere, with all my daddy's ugly old sins coming by to pay me a visit like a bunch of long-lost relatives.

Now the exact same thing was happening with Frank Wyatt's sins and his long-lost relatives. Frank didn't have any children left, so the sins were all being visited on me and my kids. I'd noticed that my father-in-law didn't have any close friends and that people seemed to steer a wide path around him at church, but I'd never known why. Now Alvin Greer and Merle Peterson had told me the reason—Frank had cheated his relations out of their inheritance. If every Wyatt cousin felt as bitter about it as they did, there would be a long line of them waiting to bid on Wyatt Orchards if I had to auction it off. And they'd only bid a penny each.

I worried about what to do as I drove the team home from town. The spraying had to get done before the trees budded. If I didn't spray I wouldn't get any fruit. Terrible things would nibble away at it, like blight and coddling moth and brown rot and tree borers. But if I spent all my money on spray, how would I earn enough to pay off the mortgage in the forty-some days I had left? Should I ask Gabe for a loan? No, I should pay him for all the work he'd done already! Maybe I could find my daddy and beg him for money—if he had any, which I doubted.

I returned to Peterson's the next day and used my asparagus money to buy the stuff I needed to spray my trees. I would have many long hours to figure out how to beg, borrow, or steal more money to pay the bank as I rode up and down the orchard rows on the spray rig.

It took all four of us to spray—Aunt Batty and Becky driving the horses, Gabe and I operating the rig. The boys begged to cut school again and help us out but Gabe told them that their education was more important. I recalled what Aunt Batty had said about letting my

kids dream their own dreams instead of forcing them to live mine, and I knew Gabe was right.

The spray surrounded us like a blue fog, sticking to our hair and turning our clothing stiff. The stench of sulfur was awful. “We smell like we’ve all taken a boat ride down the River Styx to Hades,” Aunt Batty said. Surely this was punishment enough for my sins, wasn’t it? I kept waiting for a miracle—for God to drop five hundred dollars out of the sky into my lap—but April turned to May and there was still no miracle in sight.

One rainy morning when we couldn’t work outside, Aunt Batty and I chopped rhubarb and made a batch of preserves. I enjoyed having another woman to do my household chores with, even if Aunt Batty did drive me to distraction sometimes, singing hymns at the top of her voice.

“I need a miracle real bad, Aunt Batty,” I told her as I pulled boiling hot jelly jars out of the kettle with a pair of tongs. She had been singing about what a friend she had in Jesus, so I thought maybe she could pull a few strings for me. “Next time you talk to God, could you ask Him real nice for me?”

“Why, sure, Toots. What kind of a miracle do you need?”

“He already knows. And tell Him I’m sorry about the lies and everything. I promise I won’t do it anymore.”

After we finished spraying, Gabe and I moved all the beehives back into the orchard. Aunt Batty said it was best to do it at night so the bees would all be home in their beds. I headed up to my own bed afterward, but when I happened to glance out my window once the lights were out, I noticed that Gabe’s light in the barn was still burning. I started taking note of it after that, and no matter how late I turned in, Gabe’s light always stayed on long after mine.

One night my curiosity got the best of me. I put my coat on over my nightgown and crept outside to see what he was up to. From outside

Gabe's window I could clearly hear the *clackety-clack* of his typewriter keys.

I cried myself to sleep that night because the truth had finally sunk in—Gabe was a writer, not a farmer. Only a man who truly loved to write would stay up after a long, hard day of work to do it. Gabe was helping me because I had helped him, but that didn't change what he was. Mr. Wakefield was a lawyer and Reverend Dill was a minister and Gabe was a writer. Period. Even if he was Matthew Wyatt—and I was starting to doubt that he was—he would always want to write, not farm.

*"I can't change what I am, Eliza,"* my daddy had once told me. I'd begged him to settle down somewhere so I could have a home to live in and a real family like all the other kids had. *"Look it up in the Good Book,"* he'd said. *"A leopard can't change his spots."* Gabe could grow a beard like a hobo or put on a pair of farmer's overalls, but he couldn't change what he was any more than my daddy could.

Change was all around me this time of year. The robins had returned, the buds were swelling on the trees, and the orchard was about to bloom. I used to grow excited every spring, waiting for all the trees to bloom and the birds to start singing again. But I'd been through too many changes this past year to get excited this time. I lay awake worrying night after night, watching the light in Gabe's room burn until well after midnight, unable to sleep as I counted the days until the Deer Springs Savings and Loan would demand their money. Only one week left...Then five days...Then three.

Two days before the loan was due, I was pacing in my bedroom shortly before dawn when I thought I heard Winky barking outside. I peered out of my window and saw a ghostly figure dressed in white, fluttering through the cherry orchard. I ran to a different window for a better view, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Beneath lacy pink branches that had seemed to flower overnight, Aunt Batty danced in



circles in her nightgown, with Winky barking and leaping for joy alongside her. As the sun slowly rose behind them, a chorus of birds burst into song. If fairies and wood sprites had crept out from behind the trees and joined the celebration, it wouldn't have surprised me in the least.

I ran downstairs and slipped into my coat and a pair of boots. As I grabbed Aunt Batty's coat off the hook and hurried outside with it, I told myself I was only going out there to keep the poor, silly woman from catching her death of pneumonia. But in my heart I knew something else drew me. The miracle of springtime had exploded all around her and I needed a miracle to descend upon me, as well. Aunt Batty had promised me an angel and God had sent me two. Maybe another wonder would drop out of the sky along with the cherry blossoms.

Aunt Batty grinned when she saw me hurrying toward her, then she lifted her arms in the air and twirled like a ballerina. I halted her in the middle of her spin and draped her coat over her shoulders.

"What are you doing out here in only your nightclothes?" I chided. "You'll catch your death!"

"Not death, Toots—life! Resurrection life! Eternal life!" She spread her arms wide and her coat slipped to the ground. "Walter told me to come out here and see God's promise for myself!"

I knew that a few more of her tent stakes must have slipped loose if she heard Walter talking to her after all these years. Winky must have suffered the same affliction. He was still leaping and twirling and barking as if he hadn't noticed that his dancing partner had stopped. I bent to pick up Aunt Batty's coat and slipped it around her again. She gripped my hands.

"Did you come out to dance with us?" she asked, twirling me around in a circle with her.

"No. I...I thought you might be cold."

“Come and join us, Gabe!” she suddenly called out. I turned around, mortified to see Gabe walking toward us. He had dressed hastily, with one strap of his bib overalls still undone and his coat unbuttoned. He had forgotten his shirt altogether.

“What’s going on out here?” he asked, combing one hand through his tousled hair.

Aunt Batty dropped one of my hands and beckoned for him to join our little circle. “Come on, we’re celebrating life!”

“Life?” He seemed as puzzled as I was. He halted a few feet away from us, his hands shoved safely in his pockets. I freed my other hand from her grasp and quickly pulled my coat closed over my nightgown.

“Yes, *life!*” Aunt Batty said, spreading her arms wide again.

“I’ve seen spring come to the orchard every year as far back as I can remember and I’ve never grown tired of it. Oh, the wonder of it! The outrageous beauty! God didn’t have to give us cherry blossoms, you know. He didn’t have to make apple trees and peach trees burst into flower and fragrance. But God just loves to splurge. He gives us all this magnificence and then, if that isn’t enough, He provides *fruit* from such extravagance!”

Gabe and I exchanged uneasy glances. “You’re barefoot, Aunt Batty,” he said. “Maybe we ought to go inside and talk about this.”

“Oh, but the promise of eternal life is out here, all around us! A week ago these trees were just dead sticks—now they’re bursting with life! It’s a message from God, just like Walter said.”

“When did Walter tell you all this?” I asked warily.

“Oh, years ago!”

I frowned. Couldn’t she see that her stories had more holes than her old moth-eaten yellow sweater? “You told me all about Walter Gibson, but you never said—”

“That’s because I didn’t get to finish Walter’s story. Well, I guess it’s my story, too.”

“You mean there’s more?”

“Much more! Jesus said that whoever believes in Him will never die! You and your kids will see Sam again, Gabe will see all his friends and loved ones again, I’ll see mine....Springtime is God’s promise that someday we’ll all share His resurrection life! Our weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning!”

## ~ Hoofstuk tien ~

“Daar is nog net ’n paar akker se bome om te snoei,” sê ek een oggend vir Gabe terwyl ons die gereedskap op die bakkie laai. “Hoekom begin jy nie vandag met die herstelwerk aan tannie Batty se dak nie, dan maak ek self die snoeiwerk klaar?” Gabe het reeds die skade gaan bekyk en vir tannie Batty ’n lys gegee van alles wat hy van die timmerwerf nodig het. Ek het geen idee of sy dit kan bekostig of hoe sy daarvoor gaan betaal nie, maar ek het genoeg bekommernis van my eie met die naderende lente sonder om nog hare ook daarby te voeg.

“Wel, kom ons dink net vir ’n oomblik daaroor na,” sê Gabe stadig. Ek kan die aarseling in sy stem hoor.

“Is daar iets verkeerd met my idee?” vra ek ongeduldig.

“Ek hou nie daarvan dat jy alleen so ver van die huis af moet werk nie. As iets dalk gebeur – ”

“Soos wat?”

“Wel ... Jy kan van die leer afval en – ”

“Ek het tot nou toe nie geval nie, of hoe? In elk geval, jy kan ook by tannie Betty se huis van die leer afval. Wat is die verskil?” Ek daag hom uit om te impliseer dat ek ’n hulpelose vrou is, maar hy het genoeg verstand om dit nie te doen nie. Hy ondersoek ’n saaglem voordat hy dit by die ander gooi.

“Wat daarvan as ek aangaan met die snoeiwerk,” sê hy uiteindelik, “dan vat jy vir tannie Batty in dorp toe om die nodige vir die herstelwerk te gaan koop?”

“Ek sal nie een stuk hout van ’n ander een kan uitken nie,” sê ek. “Dit sal makliker wees as jy haar dorp toe vat.”

Hy kan my nie in die oë kyk nie. “Ek wil liever nie.”

“Hoekom?”

“Dit is nie my bakkie nie. Dis joune.” Hy draai ’n bietjie te gou weg. Ek kan nie sy gesig sien nie, maar ek kry die gevoel daar is nog ’n rede waarom hy nie wil gaan nie. Hy het immers al een keer tevore met my bakkie na die plek gery waar die boemelaars kamp. Hy kan ook die perd voor die wa inspan in plaas daarvan om met die bakkie te ry. Terwyl ek kyk hoe hy weg hink om die gereedskapkamer se deur toe te maak, steeds leunend op Walter Gibson se kieke, probeer ek uitpluis wat die regte verduideliking kan wees. Sover ek weet, het Gabe hoegenaamd geen rede om Deer Springs te vermy nie, tensy

hy bang is die mense sal hom as Matthew Wyatt herken. En as hy wel Matthew Wyatt is, is die grap ten koste van hom, want hý besit die bakkie, nie ek nie.

“Ek sal dit waardeer as jy my by daardie laaste klompie bome gaan aflaai voordat jy dorp toe gaan,” sê hy toe hy terugkom by die bakkie.

Ek weet nie wat my die meeste irriteer nie: Die feit dat Gabe iets wegsteek, of die feit dat hy die laaste ruk al die besluite neem. Hy het twee weke gelede teruggetrek na die werkswinkel om daar te slaap en vir tannie Batty gesê sy kan nou die onderste spaarkamer kry. Toe het hy kweekkaste begin gereedmaak vir die plantseisoen en die ploeg se lemme geslyp sonder dat iemand hom gevra het om dit te doen. Gisteraand het ek op hom afgekom waar hy aan die trekker werk. ’n Mens sou dink hy hoor my skoonpa se stem, so helder soos daglig, wat bevele uitdeel en hom rondstuur soos hy altyd met Sam gedoen het: *“Seun, dit is tyd om dit-en-dit te doen ... Seun, jy moet daardie ding regmaak.”*

Op die ou einde vat ek vir tannie Batty na die timmerwerf toe. Ek het ekstra eiers en melk om te verkoop en wil ook sommer by meneer Wakefield se kantoor aangaan terwyl ek in die dorp is om te hoor of hy enige vordering gemaak het met die opsporing van Matthew. Te oordeel na die slaperige, deurmekaar uitdrukking op die ou prokureur se gesig was hy dalk van my laaste besoek af nog die hele tyd aan die slaap hier agter sy lessenaar.

“Jammer, Eliza. Ek het nog nie ’n woord van Matthew gehoor nie. Jammer ... Ek het ’n brief na Washington gestuur, maar dié dinge neem tyd. Jammer ...”

“Dis oukei, meneer Wakefield.” Hy lyk so jammerlik dat ek hom soos ’n baba wil sus totdat hy weer aan die slaap raak. Teen die tyd dat ek terugstap timmerwerf toe sit tannie Batty en Becky reeds in die bakkie vir my en wag. Die hout, teerseile en dakspane is gelaai en ons is gereed om te gaan. Die Here alleen weet hoe sy vir dit alles betaal het.

Vir die volgende paar weke is Gabe oral tegelyk en werk hy soos ’n veldbrand. Hy staan voor die son op om die take in die skuur af te handel, dan werk hy vir ’n ruk aan tannie Batty se dak en dan is hy om die skuur en in die boord besig om alles gereed te kry vir die lente. Ek hoef nooit aan die seuns te karring om hulle werkies te doen solank Gabe saam met hulle werk nie. Tog is die einste ding waarvoor ek bang is – dat hulle geheg sal raak aan Gabe – stadig besig om te gebeur en ek weet nie wat om daaromtrent te doen nie. Al probeer ek hoe hard, kan ek my kinders nie in die aande keer om uit te glip werkswinkel toe sodra ek my rug draai nie. Veral Luke begin baie van hom hou en dit verstom my om te hoor dat die seun met Gabe praat, alhoewel hulle

albei gewoonlik so sag praat dat ek nie 'n woord kan verstaan van wat enigeen van hulle sê nie. Ek weet nie wat hulle bespreek nie, maar Gabe is baie geduldig met Luke, al hikkel hy.

Gabe wen Becky se hart toe hy vir haar die swaai maak soos hy belowe het. Sy dans al om my en tannie Batty terwyl ons kyk hoe hy dit aan die tak van 'n ou eikeboom aan die voorkant van die huis ophang.

“Lydia se seuns het 'n swaai aan hierdie einste boom gehad,” sê tannie Batty. “As ek reg onthou, het dit aan daardie einste tak gehang.”

“Jy is reg daaroor,” sê Gabe.

Ek kyk verbaas op na hom terwyl hy op die tak klouter om die tou vas te maak. Het hy homself sopas weggegee?

“Hoe weet jy waar hulle swaai was?” vra ek hom.

“Ek het oorblyfsels van die ou tou gekry waar dit in die tak vassit.” Hy krap met sy vinger aan die hout sodat stukke verrotte tou op ons val. “Sien? Twintig jaar oue tou.”

Dit is dieselfde met alles wat hy doen – Gabe lyk so tuis op hierdie plaas, asof hy sy lewe lank hier gebly het. Hy het die veld geploeg waar ons altyd die groentetuin maak en het steggies in die kweekkaste geplant. Hy het neskassies in die hoenderhok gesit sodat die hennie kan begin lê en het ook nuwe ogiesdraad gespan sodat die valke nie die kuikens kan vang nie. Hy het al die gereedskap en ander toerusting olie gegee en geslyp en reggemaak asof dit syne is. Hy hou ook die binnekant van die skuur net so netjies soos Frank altyd aangedring het dit moet wees.

“Jy weet nogal baie oor die bestuur van 'n plaas,” sê ek een middagete vir hom. “Het jy op 'n plaas grootgeword?”

“Ek het 'n paar somers op my oom en tannie se plaas deurgebring.”

Hy kyk nie van sy bord af op toe hy praat nie. Ek kan agterkom hy haat dit om my vrae te beantwoord. As hy 'n skilpad was, sou hy nou in sy dop gekruip het. Ek verstaan hoe hy voel. Ek doen presies dieselfde ding wanneer mense my oor my verlede begin uitvra, maar dit weerhou my nie daarvan om vir Gabe uit te vra nie.

“Waar was hulle plaas?”

“In die ooste.”

“Regtig? Watter staat?”

“New York.” Hy vermy my volgende vraag deur na tannie Batty te draai. “As Tannie nie omgee nie, wil ek graag hê Tannie moet môreoggend saam met my kothuis toe kom en vir my wys hoe Tannie 'n paar goedjies gedoen wil hê.”

“Nou goed. Terloops, hoe vorder my dak?” vra sy.

“Die werk vorder goed. Al hierdie reën wat ons die afgelope ruk gehad het, het my net ’n bietjie teruggehou.”

“Ek is nie haastig nie,” sê sy. “En die reën is goed vir die appelbome.”

Ek besef skielik dat ek ook nie haastig is vir Gabe om klaar te maak nie. Sodra hy die dak reggemaak het, sal hy seker teruggaan Chicago toe. Die gedagte dat ek sonder sy hulp sal moet klaarkom, laat my paniekerig voel. Ek onthou dat tannie Batty gesê het sy was onvoorbereid op die dag toe Walter Gibson haar verlaat het, en ek besluit ek moet liever gewoon raak aan die idee van Gabe wat weggaan voordat dit my onkant vang.

“Jy weet, Gabe,” sê ek terwyl ek sy koffiebeker vol maak, “jy het my al dubbel en dwars terugbetaal vir die versorging van jou been. Jy is vry om te gaan wanneer jy wil.”

Hy antwoord nie, maar ek voel sy oë op my. Toe ek uiteindelik opkyk na hom sê hy: “’n Man se lewe is ’n baie groot skuld om terug te betaal.” Hy het gevaarlike oë – misterieus en donker. Ek kan nie baie lank na sy oë kyk voordat dit voel of ek van die eindpunt van die aarde afval nie. Die sagtheid daarin trek my na hom toe; tog stoot die pyn wat ek daarin sien my terselfdertyd weg.

“Wat van jou werk by die koerant?” vra ek. “Moet jy nie een van die dae teruggaan werk toe nie?”

“Ek is nie seker dat ek nog ’n werk het nie. Ek het vir my redakteur hierdie adres gegee toe ek my storie ingestuur het. Ek wag nog om van hom te hoor.”

Ek weet hoe goed Gabe se storie oor die boemelaars is en ek wonder hoeveel die koerant hom daarvoor sal betaal. Genoeg om Frank Wyatt se lening by die bank te betaal? Toe ek vanoggend na die kalender gekyk het, het ek besef dat die helfte van die negentig dae wat meneer Preston my gegee het reeds verby is. Ek spaar elke sent wat ek kry uit die ekstra eiers en melk wat ek in die dorp verkoop, maar ek weet dit gaan nie genoeg wees nie. Die tyd loop uit en ek het steeds geen idee waar ek die geld gaan kry nie.

Alvin Greer het skynbaar ook besef my tyd raak min, want hy kom sien my dieselfde middag nog. Ek hoor ’n kar in my laning aankom en toe ek sien dit is meneer Greer, trek ek my jas aan en gaan op die agterstoep uit om met hom te praat. Ek weet dit sou gasvry wees om hom binne te nooi, maar ek wil hom nie weer in my voorkamer hê terwyl hy alles sit en bekyk asof hy nie kan wag om sy hande daarop te lê nie.

“Goeiemiddag, mevrou Wyatt,” sê hy en lig sy hoed.

“Goeiemiddag.” Ek kruis my arms voor my bors en wag. Dit neem hom nie lank om die skimp te vang en tot die punt te kom nie.

“Is jy bewus daarvan dat ’n bende boemelaars op jou eiendom naby die

treinspoor kamp?”

“Ja, ek weet van hulle.”

“Wil jy hê ek moet hulle vir jou wegjaag?”

“Nee, ek het gesê hulle kan daar kamp. Hulle het nêrens anders om heen te gaan nie.”

Hy kyk stroef na my. “Dink jy dit is verstandig? Ek bedoel, jy is heeltemal alleen hier met die drie kinders.”

“Dit is tog die Christelike ding om te doen, of hoe, meneer Greer? Sê die Goeie Boek dan nie wat ons ook al vir die geringste van ons broers doen, doen ons eintlik vir die Here nie?”

Meneer Greer doen sy bes om sy humeur te beteuel, asof hy ’n baie opgewonde hond aan ’n kort leiband het. “Ek het nie hierheen gekom om oor die Goeie Boek te praat – ”

“Hoekom het jy hierheen gekom?”

“Wel, ek het ’n paar weke gelede ’n brief van meneer Wakefield, jou prokureur, ontvang wat sê jy kan nie my aanbod aanvaar om hierdie plek te koop voordat hy Frank Wyatt se boedel afgehandel het nie. Ek weet sulke dinge neem tyd; daarom het ek gewonder of jy intussen hulp nodig het?”

“Nee, dankie, meneer Greer. Ek het reeds hulp.”

Hy knip sy oë in ongeloof. “Regtig?”

Ek besef skielik dat Alvin Greer dalk vir Matthew Wyatt sal herken en besluit om hom aan Gabe voor te stel.

“Ja. My man se tannie Batty het by my en die kinders ingetrek om ons te help,” verduidelik ek. “Ek het ook ’n bestuurder aangestel om die boord te hanteer. Hy is buite in die skuur as jy hom wil ontmoet.” Ek stap voor hom uit sonder om te wag dat meneer Greer moet antwoord. Gabe kom by die deur uit net toe ons by die skuur kom.

“Daar is jy,” sê ek. “Ek wil jou voorstel aan my buurman aan die noordekant. Dit is meneer Alvin Greer.” Ek stel Gabe doelbewus nie op sy naam voor nie, want ek wil wag om te sien of hy dit self sal doen. Gabe trek sy handskoen uit en hou sy hand na Greer toe uit.

“Gabe Harper. Aangename kennis.”

Ek hou Greer se gesig dop en wag vir die oomblik van herkenning. Dit kom nie. Die man gesels oor koetjies en kalfies, maar dit is duidelik dat Greer skielik haastig is om huis toe te gaan. Hy het vandag hierheen gekom met die verwagting om ’n dame in die moeilikheid aan te tref sodat hy die rol van ridder op ’n wit perd kan inneem. Die feit dat ek nie sy hulp nodig het nie; dat hy nie sy hande op Wyatt-boorde sal kan lê nie, het sy humeur aan die brand gestee en hy moet wegkom voordat dit ontplof.



“Wat makeer hom?” vra Gabe toe Greer sy kar haastig in my laning afstuur.

“Ek het vir hom gesê jy is my bestuurder.”

“Het hy ’n probleem daarmee?”

“Hy wil my boord hê. Hy lek al sy lippe af en wag net dat ek moet misluk sodat hy kan oorneem.”

“Watter reg het hy om jou boord oor te neem?” vra Gabe. Hy lyk geïrriteerd terwyl hy staan en kyk hoe Greer wegy.

“Sy vrou is ’n Wyatt. Hy reken sy is geregtig daarop aangesien sy bloedfamilie is en ek nie.”

Die volgende dag kom Dan Foster, die distrik se sheriff, by my huis aan. Hy is ’n groot man laat in sy vyftigs en net so stewig met ’n breë bors soos ’n kampioenbokser. Hy het ’n netjiese bruin uniform aan en sy blink kenteken is daaraan vasgesteek. Sy pistool is in die holster en hang teen sy heup.

Ek het nog altyd jammer gevoel vir enige krimineel wat met sheriff Foster moet paaie kruis. Toe ek hom uit sy kar sien klim, dink ek dadelik dat hy nuus van Matthew bring. Ek gaan haastig uit om hom binne te nooi.

“Nee, dankie, mevrou Wyatt,” sê hy en lig sy hoed. “Ek het nie vir jou kom sien nie. Alvin Greer sê jy het ’n bestuurder aangestel en ek sal graag met hom wil gesels, as ek mag.”

Ek staar verstom na hom. Dan onthou ek tannie Batty het gesê sheriff Foster se vrou is ook ’n Wyatt en ek weet hulle span saam teen my.

“Hoekom? Waaroor gaan dit eintlik, Sheriff?”

“Alvin sê vir my die ou is ’n vreemdeling en ek – ”

“Wat het dit met julle te doen as ek ’n vreemdeling wil aanstel? Het julle dan niks beters om te doen as om na elke plaas in die distrik te gaan en te kyk wie daar werk nie?” Ek dink hy sal dalk kwaad word, maar hy word nie.

“Ons is bure, Eliza. Ons almal verstaan hoe moeilik dit vir jou moet wees nou dat die mans in jou familie weg is. Hoekom vra jy nie maar eers jou bure vir hulp nie?” Hy praat so vriendelik dat ek ’n klein bietjie jammer voel omdat ek so agterdogtig is, maar ek kan myself nie keer nie.

“Ek weet jy dink dit is jou werk om my teen vreemdelinge te beskerm, maar ek kan na myself kyk, Sheriff. Wie ek aanstel om hier te werk het niks met jou te doen nie. Vir al wat jy weet, is die man familie van my.”

“Glo my, dit sal my baie beter laat voel as dit waar is.” Hy hou my stip dop en wag dat ek dit moet bevestig, sy hand wat gemaklik op sy geweer rus. Ek kan nie vir hom jok nie. Hy maak uiteindelik keel skoon en sê: “Ek het Frank Wyatt my lewe lank geken en kan nog onthou toe jou man, Sam, ’n kind was. Dit is ter wille van hulle dat ek hier is. Ek is baie besorgd oor jou en die

kinders. Dit is ook my werk as die distrik se sheriff om wetsgehoorsame burgers te beskerm teen gevaarlike rondlopers en bedrieërs.”

“Dankie, maar ek kan jou verseker dat hy nie een van die twee is nie.”

“Ek moet steeds met hom praat, Mevrou.” Hy steek sy hand in sy baadjie se sak en bring ’n koevert te voorskyn. “Hierdie brief is van Chicago af per geregistreerde pos gestuur en is geadresseer aan ’n meneer Gabriel Harper, by hierdie adres. Bill White by die poskantoor het my gevra of ek iets daaromtrent weet en ek het gesê ek sal dit self vir meneer Harper bring aangesien ek in elk geval van plan was om hierheen te kom.”

Ek weet nie hoekom ek so beskermend oor Gabe voel nie. Hy het geheime in sy verlede wat hy nie wil hê ek of enigiemand anders van moet weet nie, maar hy kan tog sekerlik nie ’n gevaarlike voortvlugtige of ’n skurk wees nie? Gabe is so saggeaard en ek dink eerlikwaar nie hy is in staat daartoe om die wet te oortree nie. Waarom is ek dan huiwerig om hom oor te gee? Sheriff Foster kan hom dalk selfs as Matthew Wyatt herken. Is dit nie wat ek wil hê nie? Ek voel baie deurmekaar.

“Hy werk vanoggend onder by tannie Batty se huis,” sê ek uiteindelik. “Ek sal hom vir jou gaan – ”

“Dankie, maar ek weet hoe om by Betty Fowler se kothuis te kom.” Hy klim terug in sy kar en ry weg.

Ek wil ook na die kothuis toe gaan om te hoor wat die sheriff en Gabe vir mekaar te sê het, maar ek sal tevrede moet wees met tannie Batty se verslag. Later die middag vra ek haar uit oor hulle ontmoeting terwyl ek brooddeeg meng. Dit voel die afgelope ruk of ons vinniger brood eet as wat ek dit kan bak. Tannie Batty is by my in die kombuis besig om die spens goed skoon te maak noudat Queen Esther uiteindelik ontslae geraak het van al die muise.

“Daardie Dan Foster was sommer net nuuskierig,” sê sy vir my. Sy draai haar vloerlap asof dit die sheriff se nek is. “Hy het arme Gabe ondervra asof hy vir moord gesoek word. Gevra waar hy voorheen gebly en gewerk het. Hy het selfs die vermetelheid gehad om hom vir ’n lys verwysings te vra. Daardie Dan kan ’n regte boelie wees as hy die dag lus het, wat seker ’n goeie ding is wanneer jy met kriminele werk.”

“Wat het Gabe gesê?”

“Hy is dalk ’n stil man, maar hy het nie toegelaat dat Dan hom boelie nie. Hy het gesê sy naam is Gabriel Harper, hy het in Chicago gebly en dat enige besigheid wat hy met Wyatt-boorde het, niks met Dan te doen het nie. Ek het gesê: ‘Mooi so, Gabe!’ en dit het Dan ordentlik opgewerk. Hy het gesê dit is eintlik ’n privaat gesprek en toe vra hy my om te loop. Ek sê toe dit is my huis, dalk moet hy liever loop. Dinge het daarna net agteruitgegaan.”

Ek glimlag toe ek die deeg uit die mengbak haal en dit begin knie. “Ek is jammer ek het dit gemis,” sê ek.

“O, dit was vet pret. Teen die tyd dat Dan hier weg is, het hy ons al gedreig. Hy het belowe om sy oog op Gabe te hou en het gesweer as hy uitvind Gabe misbruik ’n kwesbare weduwee, sal die hel hom kom haal.”

Tannie Batty verdwyn weer by die spens in en ek hoor hoe sy goed daarbinne rondskuif.

Ek is ’n klein bietjie teleurgesteld omdat ek niks nuuts omtrent Gabe gehoor het nie, maar net soos tannie Batty is ek aan sy kant.

“Wat van die brief wat die sheriff vir Gabe gebring het?” vra ek toe ek skielik daarvan onthou.

Tannie Batty se wollerige kop loer by die spens uit. Daar is ’n breë glimlag op haar gesig. “Dit is wonderlike nuus. Hulle gaan Gabe se storie as ’n reeks in die Chicago-koerant publiseer.”

My hande vries op die deeg. “Nou sal hy seker hier weggaan.”

“O, ek dink nie so nie, Toots. Gabe het ’n goeie hardkoppige streep in hom. Die sheriff het hom hier probeer wegkry en dit het net gemaak dat Gabe sy voete soos ysterkloue in die grond slaan. Jy het vir die mense vertel hy is jou bestuurder en jy kan maar glo dat Gabe van nou af Wyatt-boorde gaan bestuur.”

Ek laat sak my kop in my meel bedekte hande en begin huil van verligting. Ek het nie besef hoe bang ek was vir die moontlikheid om weer op my eie te wees nie. Ek maak baie meer staat op Gabe as wat ek graag wil erken. Tannie Batty sit haar vloerlap neer en kom vou haar arms styf om my lyf.

“Jou arme dingetjie,” troos sy. “Jy dra ’n vreeslike swaar las saam met jou, nè? Jy hoef jou nie meer te bekommer nie, want God het vir jou ’n beskermengel gestuur om jou vir ’n rukkie te kom help.”

Ek vee my oë af en leun dan met my kop teen haar skouer. “Ek dink Hy het vir my twee engele gestuur.”

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Een koue, reënerige oggend sien ek een van ons koeie tree vreemd op. My skoonpa het haar verlede somer gevat om gedek te word en ek aanvaar sy staan op die punt om te kalf. Anders as die ander drie koeie wat nog altyd geweet het wat om te doen wanneer dit tyd is, is dit Myrtle se eerste keer om te kalf en ek kan sien sy sukkel. Bang om haar te lank alleen te los, hardloop ek in die reën terug huis toe om hulp te gaan soek. Becky en tannie Batty is in

die kombuis besig om die eiers in te pak sodat ons dit in die dorp kan gaan verkoop.

“Is Gabe nog onder by die kothuis besig?” vra ek vir haar.

“Ja, hy werk vandag aan die binnekant aangesien dit reën.”

“Becky, jy moet vinnig hardloop en hom gaan roep,” sê ek. “Trek Luke se ou oorskoene aan en vat my sambreel. Sê vir hom Myrtle sukkel om te kalf en ek vra hy moet kom help.”

“Moenie moeite doen om vir Gabe te gaan haal nie,” sê tannie Batty en steek haar hand uit om vir Becky te keer. “Hy sal van geen nut wees nie. Hy weet skaars watter kant van die koei die kop is en watter kant die stert. Ek hou baie van Gabe, maar” – sy praat skielik sagter – “hy weet nie altyd wat hy doen nie.”

“Wat bedoel Tannie? Hy doen dan vir my allerhande dinge op die plaas.”

“Ja wel, hy word elke dag beter daarmee,” sê sy en vee nog ’n eier met die vadoek af. “Toe Gabe egter aan die begin met die werkies begin help het, kon Jimmy twee koeie melk in die tyd wat dit Gabe geneem het om een te melk – en dit was eers nadat hy oor sy vrees gekom het dat die koei hom gaan skop.”

Ek wil nog steeds glo dat Gabe eintlik Matthew Wyatt is. Hy is tog jare gelede van die plaas af weg en dit is moontlik dat hy baie dinge teen hierdie tyd vergeet het. “Hy is dalk net uit oefening,” sê ek. “Hy het vir ’n lang ruk in die stad gebly.”

“Ek sal wed dat hy sy lewe lank in die stad gebly het. Daardie jong man het nie op ’n plaas grootgeword nie.” Sy fluister weer toe sy byvoeg: “Hy kom vra my vir raad.”

“Raad waarom?”

“Alles,” sê sy en trek haar skouers op. “Hoe om die hoenders te kry om te lê, wanneer om die tuin te ploeg, hoe die kunsmisstrooier werk ... Hy was aan die begin ook redelik bang vir die perde. Seker maar omdat hulle so groot is. Hy het gesê hy het nooit in Chicago perde besit nie, net karre. Ek het vir hom gesê ’n mens moet vir ’n perd wys wie is baas, en hy het gelag en gesê hy weet reeds dit is die perd. Hy kom nou baie beter reg met hulle en sit byna nooit meer die harnas agterstevoor om aan nie. Gisteroggend het ek vir hom gesê die frambooslote wat Frank verlede herfs geplant het, is gereed om gesnoei te word en hy het geen idee gehad waarvan ek praat nie.”

“Ek weet ook nie daarvan nie en ek bly al tien jaar hier. Hoe lank het Frank frambose gekweek?”

“Vir so lank as wat ek kan onthou,” sê sy en bekijk nog ’n eier. “Lydia het geweet hoe baie ek van frambose hou en sy het my elke jaar toegelaat om genoeg te pluk. Ná haar dood moes ek daarvoor betaal. Hulle was toe nie

meer naastenby so lekker nie. 'n Mens moet frambose op dieselfde dag eet as wat jy dit gepluk het anders is hulle net goed genoeg vir konfyt en – ”

“Luister, wat moet ek met die koei doen?” Ek wil haar nie graag in die rede val nie, maar tannie Batty se gedagtes kan soveel draaie loop. “Weet Tannie enigiets omtrent die geboorte van 'n kalf?”

“Die meeste koeie wat ek al besit het, het heeltemal goed op hulle eie reggekom. Ek onthou egter 'n keer of wat toe Pa 'n kalf moes draai. Ek sou vir hom warm water aandra en so aan, maar ek was altyd te klein om hom regtig te help. Dit verg 'n man se krag.”

“Sal Tannie gou uitkom skuur toe en na Myrtle kyk?”

“Natuurlik, Toots.”

Nadat ons die koei die hele oggend dopgehou het, is dit vir albei van ons duidelik dat sy in die moeilikheid is.

“Ek is bevrees jy sal vir Myrtle moet help,” sê tannie Batty vir Gabe toe hy vir middagete huis toe kom. “Ons wil nie vir haar of die kalf verloor nie.”

“Natuurlik,” sê hy en blaas sy sop koud. “Wat wil julle hê moet ek doen?”

Tannie Batty trek 'n skewe gesig. “Ek sal maar wag tot jy klaar geëet het voordat ek die onaangename detail met jou deel.” Sy lag toe hy skielik ophou eet en sy lepel in die lug bly hang. “Het jy al ooit voorheen die geboorteproses gesien?” vra sy vir hom.

“Mm ... My oom se hond het een somer kleintjies gekry,” sê hy. “Dit lyk ook of Arabella 'n nuwe ‘kleintjie’ of twee het elke keer wanneer ek my rug draai.” Hy knipoog vir Becky.

*Moet dit nie doen nie*, wil ek vir hom skree. *Moenie maak dat my kinders jou liefkry en dan verdwyn jy uit hulle lewe nie*. Dit is egter reeds heeltemal te laat vir enige waarskuwings. Aan die manier waarop Becky Gabe se hand vat toe ons ná middagete uitstap skuur toe kan ek sien dat sy reeds die wêreld van hom dink. Hy dra 'n emmer vol warm water in sy ander hand. Hy loop nog effens kruppel, maar hy het nie meer die kiere nodig nie.

Arme Myrtle bulk van die pyn. Tannie Batty neem beheer. “Kom ons vat haar na die kleinste stal toe sodat sy nie so baie kan rondbeweeg nie. Ek en Eliza sal haar probeer stilhou terwyl jy die kalf draai. Was jou arm goed met seep, Gabe.”

Hy lykangsbevange. “Tannie bedoel tog nie ... ”

“Ek is bevrees dit is wel wat ek bedoel. Jy moet jou baadjie ook uittrek. Maak seker jy was tot ver verby jou elmboog.”

Gabe beweeg nie. Ek voel jammer vir hom en staan op die punt om my trots te sluk en na Alvin Greer toe te ry om vir hulp te vra. Dan sug Gabe skielik verslae en trek sy baadjie uit.

“Ek wonder of die *Tribune* sal belangstel in ’n artikel hieroor?” sê hy terwyl hy sy arm seep smeer.

“Nou ja, Myrtle gaan nie hiervan hou nie ...” waarsku tannie Batty toe hy gereed is.

“Ek dink ook nie ek gaan daarvan hou nie,” mompel hy.

“Wees versigtig dat sy jou nie skop nie. Pasop vir haar agterste hoewe.”

“Dit sal nie maklik wees om daarvoor te koes nie, aangesien ek reg agter haar moet staan. Maar dankie vir die waarskuwing.” Hy haal ’n paar keer diep asem, asof hy op die punt staan om onder water in te duik, en dan vra hy: “Waarna is ek nou weer op soek?”

“Die kalf se kop. Sodra jy uitgepluis het watter kant waar is, moet jy met jou hand van haar kop af na haar skouer of voorpoot beweeg en haar dan probeer omdraai. Ek dink die kalf kyk in die verkeerde rigting.”

“Hoekom kry ek die gevoel dat dit makliker klink om dit te beskryf as om dit te doen?” grap hy. Hy gaan nader aan die koei en tik haar versigtig op haar kruis, sy oë op haar agterpote.

“Praat met Myrtle, Eliza,” sê tannie Batty. “Gebruik strelende woorde.”

Ek gaan staan naby die koei se kop. Ek vryf haar neus en praat met haar soos ek met die kinders praat wanneer hulle siek is; sê vir haar alles gaan oukei wees. Wanneer ek egter terugdink aan my eie ondervinding van geboorte skenk, sal ek Myrtle nie kan kwalik neem as sy besluit om my ook te skop nie.

Gabe skraap uiteindelik genoeg moed bymekaar om te doen wat hy moet doen. Sy arm is skaars twintig sekondes in toe hy hard skree en sy gesig vertrek van pyn.

“O ja, sy het seker ’n geboortepyn,” sê tannie Batty. “Ek het vergeet om dit te noem. Sy sal van tyd tot tyd een kry, en my pa het altyd gesê dit druk omtrent die lewe uit ’n man se arm uit.”

“Hy het nie ’n grap gemaak nie,” kreun Gabe. Nadat die geboortepyn verby is, lyk hy vir ’n oomblik half aan die lam kant, maar hy gee nie op nie. Hy en Myrtle hou aan stoei vir wat soos ure voel. Hy kry die kalf se kop, verloor dit, kry dit weer en begin dan die stadige, moeisame taak om die kalf om te draai – alles tussen die koei se geboortepyne deur. Ek het gedink hy gaan dalk koud kry sonder sy baadjie aan, maar hy werk so hard dat die sweet oor sy gesig stroom en sy donker hare teen sy voorkop laat plak. Toe hy uiteindelik dink dat hy die kalf in die regte posisie het, sê tannie Batty hy moet terugstaan en Myrtle op haar eie laat klaarmaak.

Binne minute gee sy geboorte aan ’n pragtige kalf. Ek sien die louter vreugde op Gabe se gesig terwyl ons almal na die wonderwerk van geboorte

kyk. Dan loop die trane oor my eie wange terwyl ek kyk hoe die pasgebore kalf sukkel om vir die eerste keer op sy wankelrige bene te staan. Tannie Batty en Becky vat hande en dans net daar in die skuur in die rondte.

“Dankie! Dankie!” Ek huil toe ek vir Gabe omhels. Ons hou mekaar styf vas, oorweldig deur emosie. ’n Oomblik later omhels ek vir tannie Batty en Becky ook, maar selfs terwyl ek dit doen, is ek diep bewus daarvan dat dit nie dieselfde is nie. Ek voel nie dieselfde kragtige emosies deur my vloei as toe ek vir Gabe omhels het nie – en dit maak my bang.

“Myrtle se nuwe kalf moet ’n naam kry,” sê Gabe toe hy vir Becky in sy arms optel.

“Engel,” sê sy sonder huiwering. “Kom ons noem haar Engel.”

“Nou goed, dan is dit Engel.”

Toe ek daardie nag in my bed rondrol, kan ek nie die herinnering aan Gabe se omhelsing uit my hart kry nie. Kom ek ook onder sy bekoring soos Becky Jean? Ek was nog nooit voorheen verlief nie; daarom is al hierdie sensasies vir my nuut. Tog kan ek my maklik indink dat dit met my en Gabe op dieselfde stadige, seker manier kan gebeur as wat tannie Batty haar liefde vir Walter Gibson beskryf het.

’n Meer verstandige deel van my weet ek moet keer dat dit gebeur. Walter Gibson het teruggegaan Chicago toe en Gabe het vanmiddag nog gepraat van ’n artikel vir sy koerant skryf, asof hy self van plan is om terug te keer na Chicago. Hy sal nie op die plaas bly nie. Tannie Batty het self gesê hy weet niks van boerdery af nie.

Ek kan dit nie bekostig om verlief te raak op hom nie. Ek kan nie. Maar hoe kan ek dit keer?



Ek werk die hele lente deur baie hard en doen elke dag ’n man se werk. Ek moet leer hoe om alles te doen, en ek sal dit ook vir die res van my lewe moet doen as ek hierdie boord wil behou. Ek kan sien Gabe hou nie daarvan dat ek mis uit die stalle verwyder en die span perde deur reën en modder trek nie, maar die twee van ons moet saamwerk om alles gedoen te kry wat in die lente afgehandel moet word. Noudat die sneeu gesmelt het, is dit tyd om die bome te begin bemes. Tannie Becky hou vir my ’n oog oor Becky, sy maak kos en doen ook al die ander huishoudelike take terwyl ek buite werk. Die twee van hulle word groot vriende.

Ten spyte van wat tannie Batty gesê het, sien ek nooit een enkele teken dat

Gabe nie weet wat hy doen nie. Gee hy voor ter wille van haar en sodat sy hom nie sal herken nie? Of is dit ter wille van my?

Met die verloop van tyd word ek al hoe banger vir die gemaklike bekendheid wat tussen my en Gabe ontwikkel. Ons vorm 'n al sterker band terwyl ons sy aan sy werk, dinge bespreek en besluite neem. Ek het nog nooit voorheen die soort verhouding met enigiemand gehad nie; nie eers met my man, Sam, nie. Hy het die hele dag saam met sy pa gewerk terwyl ek my eie huishoudelike take gehad het om te doen.

Ek en Gabe het egter nou al die punt bereik waar ons vooruit reeds weet wat die ander een nodig het. Ons is gereed om 'n stuk gereedskap aan te gee of die perde om te draai voordat die ander persoon 'n kans gehad het om daarvoor te vra. Ons werk soos twee sweefstokartieste wat in perfekte ritme saam optree, die een gereed om die ander op presies die regte oomblik te vang. Soos ek sê, dit maak my doodbang.

Toe dit tyd is om die aspersies te oes, besluit ek dat ons almal daarmee gaan help in plaas daarvan om hulp te huur. Op dié manier kan al die geld wat ons maak, gebruik word om die verband af te betaal. Jimmy en Luke is bly om 'n dag of twee van skool te mis, totdat hulle uitvind hoe hard hulle moet werk.

Ek gebruik die wa en die span perde om die oes na die groentemark toe te vat. Dit neem langer, maar ek spaar ten minste geld op brandstof. Ek vra Gabe om saam met my te kom aangesien ek nog nooit voorheen iets op die groentemark verkoop het nie en ek is bang hulle sal my uitbuit omdat ek 'n vrou is. Ek het gedink hy sal dalk weier, aangesien hy nog altyd 'n hoop verskonings gegee het oor hoekom hy nie dorp toe kan gaan nie, maar hierdie keer stem hy in.

Ons het 'n pragtige oes ingebring en die stil, sakte Gabe hou voet by stuk met al die kopers terwyl hy soos 'n regte stadprokureur met hulle onderhandel totdat ons die beste moontlike prys kry. Nadat ek alles bymekaargetel het, het ek egter steeds nie naastenby genoeg om die banklening af te betaal nie.

Toe ons klaar is by die mark gaan ons koöperasie toe. Ek moet van my eiers-en-melk-geld gebruik vir saad en al die ander dinge wat ons nodig gaan hê om die plantwerk te doen.

Toe ek vir Becky sê sy moet die voersakke gaan uitsoek wat sy wil hê ek moet koop, lyk Gabe so verward dat ek weet hy gee nie voor nie.

“Is jy nou die kenner as dit by hoenderkos kom?” vra hy haar en krap haar rooi krulle deurmekaar.

“Nee, domkop. Dis vir my klére,” sê sy. “Mamma maak altyd vir my nuwe klere van die materiaal. Watter sak dink jy is die mooiste?”



“Moenie vir my vra nie,” sê hy en hou sy hande protesterend in die lug. “Mode was nog nooit een van my sterk punte nie.”

“Koeie wat geboorte gee, was ook nie,” terg ek, “maar jy het jou baie goed van jou taak gekwyt.”

Gabe lag en staan weg van ons af. “Glo my, ek sal eerder ’n hele trop koeie help kalf as om dames te help klere koop. Ek sal buite vir julle wag.”

Op die ou einde kies Becky geel lap bedruk met oranje blomme wat so sonskynhelder is dat ek wonder of tannie Batty ’n invloed het op haar smaak. Tannie Batty het vandag by die huis gebly, maar sy het geheimsinnig gelag toe ons vir haar gewaai het en gesê: “Dalk het ek ’n verrassing – of twee – wanneer julle terugkom.”

Ons het skaars die span perde langs die skuur tot stilstand gebring toe Becky afspring en na tannie Batty toe hardloop terwyl sy vra: “Waar is die verrassing? Kan ek dit nou sien?”

Tannie Batty lei ons almal in die skuur in asof sy ’n parade in die hoofstraat af lei. Daar in die hoek in ’n klein kampie is twee nuwe babavarkies. Becky gil van plesier toe sy oor die hekkie klim.

“Jy sal hulle dalk vir ’n rukkie met ’n bottel melk moet gee totdat hulle gewoond is daaraan om weg van hul mamma te wees,” sê tannie Batty vir haar. My dogter hou egter reeds een van hulle soos ’n baba in haar arms vas en probeer dit aan die slaap sus; ek weet dus sy sal van die idee hou. Wat my bekommer, is waar die varkies vandaan kom en hoeveel hulle gekos het, en hoe ek vir hulle gaan betaal. My skoonpa het altyd elke lente ’n paar varkies gekoop om groot te maak, maar ek het gedink ons sal hierdie jaar maar daarsonder moet klaarkom.

“Hoe ... ? Waar ... ?” stamel ek. “Ek kan nie betaal vir – ”

“Jy hoef jou glad nie daaroor te bekommer nie,” sê tannie Batty glimlaggend. “Ons moet tog ham en spek hê, of hoe?”

Ons moet spuitstof vir die vrugtebome ook hê en ek wens dit was nie nodig om my te bekommer oor hoe ek daarvoor gaan betaal nie, maar ek is wel bekommerd daaroor. Ek het my skoonpa se kwitansies en voorraadboeke nagegaan om te probeer uitpluis wat ek moet koop en hoeveel ek gaan nodig hê. Van wat ek kan sien, het hy altyd die bestanddele vir die spuitstof op krediet gekoop en dit terugbetaal wanneer hy die oes verkoop het. Toe ek egter ingaan dorp toe om my bestelling by Peterson se winkel te gaan plaas, sing Merle Peterson skielik ’n ander deuntjie.

“Ek is jammer, mevrou Wyatt, maar Frank het goeie kredietwaardigheid by ons opgebou, en jy nie. Ek moet bewyse sien dat jy kredietwaardig is voordat ek vir jou ’n rekening kan oopmaak.”

“Dis belaglik! My kredietwaardigheid is presies dieselfde as syne. Ons albei het Wyatt-boorde besit.” Die oomblik toe ek die woorde sê, onthou ek dat dit nie waar is nie. Wyatt-boorde behoort nie aan my nie; dit behoort aan Matthew. Dit is een leuen wat meneer Peterson baie maklik sal kan uitsnuffel. Ek hou my asem op en wag dat hy bewyse van my moet eis.

“Selfs al is die eiendom op jou naam, Mevrou, moet ek die krediet beskikbaar stel gebaseer op jou toekomstige oes. Aangesien jy geen ondervinding in boerdery het nie, het ek geen manier om te weet of jy in staat is om heeltemal op jou eie ’n goeie oes in te bring nie.”

Ek dwing myself om nie te huil of my humeur te verloor nie.

“Ek is nie heeltemal alleen nie. Ek het ’n bestuurder aangestel. Wil jy dalk met hom gesels?”

“Natuurlik. As hy hoogs aanbeveel van ’n ander gevestigde boord kom, sal dit beslis in jou guns tel.”

Hy het my al weer in ’n hoek. Dit klink of Merle met sheriff Foster gepraat het. Ek moet ’n manier hieruit vind. Dalk kan ek self vir Gabe ’n getuigskrif skryf. As al my probleme egter God se straf vir my leuens is, sal ek beslis in groter moeilikheid beland indien ek dit aanhou doen. My sonde het my in ’n boom op gejaag en ek kan nie ’n manier vind om uit te klim nie.

“En as ek vir jou ’n deel van my oes belowe?” vra ek.

“Dit is presies waarop krediet neerkom, Mevrou.” Hy is besig om sy geduld met my te verloor. Hy begin deur die papiere langs sy kasregister blaai asof hy belangrike dinge het om te doen en ek hom daarvan weerhou. Ek dink aan my kinders en besluit om te smeek.

“Asseblief, meneer Peterson. Ek ken my bestuurder en ek weet ek gaan hierdie jaar ’n uitstekende oes inbring, maar selfs al gebeur dit nie weet jy tog hoe waardevol Wyatt-boorde se bates is. Jy kan ons koeie of die perde of selfs van ons toerusting vat en so maklik die rekening betaal, indien dit daarop neerkom.”

“Nie in hierdie moeilike tye nie, Mevrou. Mense verkoop hulle hele plaas teen ’n appel en ’n ei, en plaastoerusting vir nog minder.”

Hy is reg. Meneer Wakefield het my gewaarsku dat ek waarskynlik nie baie sal kry indien ek Frank se toerusting op ’n veiling verkoop nie. Ek het in elk geval dié toerusting nodig om dinge op die plaas gedoen te kry.

“Meneer Peterson, hoe lank doen jy al besigheid met Wyatt-boorde?” vra ek.

“Jare lank,” antwoord hy sonder om op te kyk. “My pa het met jou skoonpa besigheid gedoen voordat ek nog gebore is.”

“As jy ons familie dan jou lewe lank al ken, is dit nie genoeg nie? Jy woon

dieselfde kerk by as ons. Jy het waarskynlik saam met Sam en sy broer Matthew grootgeword. Jou kinders gaan saam met myne skool. Tel niks hiervan dan in die guns van enige krediet nie? Kan jy dit asseblief in jou hart vind om ons uit te help? Ek is byna seker as jy jou familieboom hard genoeg skud, gaan daar iewers 'n Wyatt uitval.”

Hy kyk verbaas op, maar dan kom lê 'n woedende uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Ek hoef glad nie hard te skud nie. My pa en Frank was neefs. Ek weet nie hoe hy dit gedoen het nie, maar Frank het my pa uit sy regverdige deel gekul!”

Ek het die verkeerde kaart gespeel en verloor.

Ek het eenkeer in 'n Lutherse kerk in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, 'n preek gehoor oor hoe die sondes van die vaders die kinders tot in die tweede of derde geslag besoek. Ek was so bang dat my pa se sondes op 'n dag met 'n wa by my sal aankom vir 'n besoek dat ek Pappa dadelik daaroor uitgevra het toe hy my die kerk kom haal het. Hy het baie ongemaklik gelyk toe ek hom vertel wat die leraar gesê het, maar my pa was nooit werklik goed daarmee om enige van my vra te beantwoord nie.

“Doen jy maar net wat die Goeie Boek sê, Eliza,” het hy sag gesê. “Jy kan nie verkeerd gaan solank jy doen wat die Goeie Boek sê nie.” Tog kon ek vir 'n geruime tyd daarna nie die prediker se waarskuwing uit my kop kry nie. Ek het my dit ingedink as 'n demoniese familiereünie iewers in 'n begraaftplaas met al my pa se lelike ou sondes wat my soos 'n spul langverlore familieled kom besoek.

Nou gebeur presies dieselfde ding met Frank Wyatt se sondes en sy langverlore familieled. Frank het geen kinders oor nie; dus kom al sy sondes my en my kinders besoek. Ek het agtergekom my skoonpa het geen goeie vriende gehad nie en dat mense by die kerk altyd 'n wye draai om hom geloop het, maar ek het nooit geweet hoekom nie. Nou het Alvin Greer en Merle Peterson my die rede vertel: Frank het sy familie uit hulle erfdeel gekul. As elke liewe Wyatt-neef of -niggie so bitter daaroor voel soos hulle, sal daar 'n lang ry van hulle wees wat wag om op Wyatt-boorde te bie indien ek dit op 'n veiling moet verkoop. En elkeen sal net bereid wees om 'n pennie te betaal.

Terwyl ek met die perdekar terugry plaas toe, bekommer ek my oor wat ek gaan doen. Die bome moet bespuit word voordat dit begin bot. As ek dit nie bespuit nie, sal ek geen vrugte hê nie. Aaklige peste sal dit vernietig, soos meeldou en appelmotte en swamme en stamboorders. As ek egter al my geld op die spuitstof spandeer, hoe gaan ek genoeg bymekaarmaak om die verband af te betaal binne die veertig of meer dae wat ek oorhet? Moet ek Gabe vir 'n lening vra? Nee, ek moet hom eerder betaal vir al die werk wat hy reeds

gedoen het. Dalk kan ek my pa opspoor en hom smeeke vir geld, as hy enigiets het – wat ek sterk betwyfel.

Ek gaan die volgende dag terug na Peterson se winkel toe en gebruik my aspersie-geld om te koop wat ek nodig het om die bome te spuit. Terwyl ek op en af in die boord ry en die bome bespuit, sal ek genoeg tyd hê om te probeer uitpluis hoe om te smeeke, te leen of te steel om meer geld in die hande te kry sodat ek die bank kan betaal.

Vier van ons is nodig om die spuitwerk te doen – tannie Batty en Becky stuur die perde terwyl ek en Gabe die spuittoestel hanteer. Die seuns smeeke om weer van die skool af weg te bly en ons te help, maar Gabe sê vir hulle hul opvoeding is belangriker. Ek dink aan tannie Batty wat gesê het ek moet my kinders toelaat om hulle eie drome te droom in plaas van hulle dwing om my drome uit te leef, en ek weet Gabe is reg.

Die spuitstof hang in 'n blou mis rondom ons. Dit klou aan ons hare vas en maak ons klere styf en hard. Die stank van die swael is aaklig. “Dit ruik of ons met 'n boot op die Styx gevaar het al die pad Hades toe,” sê tannie Batty. Dit is sekerlik genoeg straf vir my sondes, of hoe? Ek bly wag vir 'n wonderwerk – vir God om vyfhonderd dollar vanuit die lug in my skoot te laat val – maar April word Mei en daar is steeds geen wonderwerk in sig nie.

Een reënigerige oggend toe ons nie buite kan werk nie, sny ek en tannie Batty 'n klomp rabarber waarvan ons konfyt kook en sommige ook inlê. Dit is vir my lekker om my huishoudelike take saam met nog 'n vrou te doen, selfs al voel dit soms of tannie Batty my die mure uitdryf, veral wanneer sy kliphard gesange sing.

“Ek het dringend 'n wonderwerk nodig, tannie Batty,” sê ek vir haar terwyl ek vuurwarm konfytbottels met 'n knyptang uit die kokende ketel haal. Sy sing oor die vriend wat sy in Jesus het; daarom dink ek toe dat sy vir my 'n paar toutjies kan trek. “Kan jy dalk mooi vir God vra wanneer jy weer met Hom praat?”

“Natuurlik, Toots. Watter soort wonderwerk het jy nodig?”

“Hy weet reeds. Sê ook vir Hom ek is jammer oor die leuens en als. Ek belowe ek sal dit nie meer doen nie.”

Nadat ons die bome gespuit het, skuif ek en Gabe al die byekorwe terug na die boord toe. Tannie Batty sê dit is beter om dit in die aand te doen wanneer al die bye by die huis en in die bed is. Toe ons klaar is, gaan ek op na my eie bed toe, maar toe ek by my venster uitkyk nadat ek die lig afgesit het, sien ek dat Gabe se lig in die skuur steeds brand. Ek begin toe daarop let en ongeag hoe laat ek in die bed klim, bly Gabe se lig altyd lank ná myne brand.

Een nag kry my nuuskierigheid die oorhand. Ek trek my jas oor my nagrok

aan en sluip na buite om te kyk waarmee hy besig is. Toe ek voor Gabe se venster staan, hoor ek duidelik die *klikketie-klak* van sy tikmasjien.

Ek huil myself daardie aand aan die slaap, want die waarheid dring uiteindelik tot my deur: Gabe is 'n skrywer, nie 'n boer nie. Net 'n man wat werklik lief is vir skryf, sal so lank ná 'n dag se harde werk wakker bly om dit te doen. Gabe help my omdat ek hom gehelp het, maar dit verander nie wie en wat hy is nie. Meneer Wakefield is 'n prokureur en dominee Dill is 'n leraar en Gabe is 'n skrywer. Punt. Selfs al is hy Matthew Wyatt – ek begin al hoe meer twyfel dat hy is – sal hy altyd eerder wil skryf as boer.

*“Ek kan nie verander wat ek is nie, Eliza,”* het my pa eenkeer vir my gesê. Ek het hom gesmeek om ons permanent iewers te vestig sodat ek 'n huis kon hê om in te bly en ook 'n familie soos al die ander kinders. *“Gaan soek dit maar in die Goeie Boek,”* het hy gesê. *“'n Luiperd kan nie sy vlekke verander nie.”* Gabe kan 'n baard groei soos 'n boemelaar en 'n boer se oorpak aantrek, maar hy kan net so min verander wat hy is as wat my pa kon.

Dit is 'n tyd van die jaar dat veranderinge oral om my plaasvind. Die wipsterte het teruggekeer, die bome bot en die boord staan op die punt om in volle blom te wees. Ek het gewoonlik in die lente opgewonde geraak en gewag dat al die bome moet bot en die voëls weer moet sing. Ek het egter die afgelopen jaar te veel veranderinge beleef om hierdie keer opgewonde te raak. Ek lê nag ná nag wakker en bekommer my terwyl ek sien hoe die lig in Gabe se kamer tot lank na middernag brand. Ek kan nie slaap nie en ek tel die dae af totdat die bank gaan opdaag om hulle geld te kom haal. Nog net een week oor ... dan vyf dae ... dan drie.

Twee dae voordat ek die lening moet terugbetaal, stap ek kort voor dagbreek heen en weer in my kamer toe ek my verbeel ek hoor Winky buite blaf. Ek loer by my venster uit en sien 'n spookagtige figuur geklee in wit wat deur die kersieboord fladder. Ek hardloop na 'n ander venster toe sodat ek beter kan sien, en kan my oë nie glo nie. Onder wasige pienk takke wat lyk of dit oornag begin blom het, dans tannie Batty in sirkels met haar nagrok aan en Winky blaf en spring van vreugde al om haar. Terwyl die son stadig agter hulle opkom, begin die voëls asof in 'n koor sing. As feetjies en kabouters nou van agter die boomstamme te voorskyn kom en die feesviering deel, sal dit my glad nie verbaas nie.

Ek hardloop af ondertoe, trek my jas en 'n paar stewels aan. Toe ek tannie Batty se jas van die kapstok af gryp en haastig daarmee by die deur uitgaan, sê ek vir myself ek gaan net buitetoë om te keer dat die arme, lawwe vrou longontsteking opdoen en sterf. In my hart weet ek egter iets anders trek my aan. Die wonder van lentetyd het oral rondom haar ontplof en ek het die

behoefte aan 'n wonderwerk wat ook oor my neerdaal. Tannie Batty het vir my 'n engel belowe en God het vir my twee gestuur. Dalk sal nog 'n wonderwerk saam met die kersiebloeisels uit die lug neerdaal.

Tannie Batty glimlag breed toe sy my na haar toe sien aankom. Dan lig sy haar arms en draai soos 'n ballerina in die rondte. Ek bring haar in die middel van haar draai tot stilstand en gooi haar jas oor haar skouers.

“Wat doen Tannie hier buite in Tannie se nagklere?” berispe ek. “Tannie soek Tannie se dood.”

“Nie dood nie, Toots – lewe! Opstandingslewe! Ewige lewe!” Sy sprei haar arms oop en haar jas val op die grond. “Walter het gesê ek moet na buite kom en God se belofte self sien.”

Ek weet nog 'n paar van haar varkies moes die hok verlaat het as sy ná al die jare vir Walter met haar hoor praat. Winky moet aan dieselfde siekte ly. Hy spring en draai en blaf steeds asof hy nie agtergekom het dat sy dansmaat nou stilstaan nie. Ek buk af om tannie Batty se jas op te tel en gooi dit weer oor haar skouers. Sy gryp my hande vas.

“Het jy uitgekom om saam met ons te kom dans?” vra sy en draai my saam met haar in die rondte.

“Nee. Ek ... ek het gedink Tannie kry dalk koud.”

“Kom dans saam met ons, Gabe!” roep sy skielik uit. Ek draai om, skaam om te sien dat Gabe na ons toe aangestap kom. Hy het haastig aangetrek en die een band van sy oorpak is nog nie vas nie en sy jas is nog oopgeknoop. Hy het heeltemal vergeet om 'n hemp aan te trek.

“Wat is hier buite aan die gang?” vra hy en druk sy hand in sy deurmekaar hare.

Tannie Batty los my een hand en beduie dat hy by ons klein kringetjie moet aansluit. “Komaan, ons vier die lewe.”

“Lewe?” Hy lyk net so verward soos ek. Hy gaan staan 'n entjie van ons af en druk sy hande vir veiligheid in sy sakke. Ek maak my ander hand uit haar greep los en trek my jas gou stywer om my nagrok.

“Ja, léwe!” sê tannie Batty en sprei haar arms weer wyd oop. “Vir so lank as wat ek kan onthou, het ek gesien hoe lente oor die boord neerdaal en ek kon nog nooit moeg raak daarvoor nie. O, die wonder daarvan! Die verregaande skoonheid. Dit was nie vir God nodig om vir ons kersiebloeisels te gee nie. Hy is nie gedwing om appelbome en perskebome te maak wat skielik blom en die heerlikste geur het nie. God hou maar net daarvan om oordadig te wees. Hy gee vir ons al hierdie ongekende prag en dan, asof dit nie genoeg is nie, laat Hy nog vrugte ook uit al die oorfloed te voorskyn kom.”

Ek en Gabe kyk ongemaklik na mekaar. “Tannie is kaalvoet,” sê hy. “Dalk moet ons ingaan huis toe en daar verder hieroor gesels.”

“Maar die belofte van die ewige lewe is dan hier buite, oral om ons. ’n Week gelede was hierdie bome net dooie stokkies – nou is dit oortrek met lewe. Dit is ’n boodskap van God, net soos Walter gesê het.”

“Wanneer het Walter dit vir Tannie gesê?” vra ek versigtig.

“O, jare gelede.”

Ek frons. Kan sy nie sien dat haar storie meer gate in het as haar ou motgevrete geel trui nie? “Tannie het my alles van Walter Gibson vertel, maar Tannie het nooit gesê – ”

“Dit is omdat ek nie klaargemaak het met Walter se verhaal nie. Wel, dit is seker maar my verhaal ook.”

“Is daar dan meer om te vertel?”

“Baie meer. Jesus het gesê wie ook al in Hom glo, sal nooit sterf nie. Jy en jou kinders sal weer vir Sam sien, Gabe sal weer al sy vriende en geliefdes sien, en ek sal myne sien ... Lente is God se belofte dat ons eendag deel sal hê aan sy opstandingslewe. Gisteraand was daar nog trane en vanmôre lag ons al weer.”

# Aunt Batty's Story

*Deer Springs, 1895*

“Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over  
it and whispers, ‘Grow, grow!’ ”

THE TALMUD



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**M**y father's house seemed very quiet after Lydia married Frank Wyatt and moved away. I missed her terribly. It was just Father and me in the long winter evenings—and he never was one to waste words. Frank hired a girl from town to help Lydia with the housework and the new baby, but Lydia was still much too busy to visit me very often. I wrote some halfhearted poems and stories, but without my sister's encouragement I lacked the confidence to send them away to be published. The year dragged slowly past.

The following spring I poured all my creative energies into planting a vegetable garden for Father and me. It cheered me out of my winter doldrums to plant the seeds, then tend them and nurture them and watch them grow. I had spent all morning in my garden one hot day in early July when Father called me inside around noontime.

"Betty, get in here. It's time to fix lunch."

I tried not to let his bossiness irritate me. That's just the way Father was. Besides, the sun was getting too hot to hoe weeds. I hung my straw hat on a hook by the door and waited a moment for my eyes to readjust from the bright sunlight. When they did, I couldn't believe what I saw. Father sat at the kitchen table counting money like a Wall Street banker. He had a huge stack of cash piled in front of him.

"Where did all that money come from?" I asked.

"We have boarders again."

"Boarders? You mean, someone rented the cottage?"

"Yes, that Gibson fellow came back. He paid for two months this time."

Surprise sucked the breath right out of me. I stared at my father, afraid to believe him, afraid to raise my hopes too high.

“Really?” I finally managed.

It peeved Father that I would question him. “You think I’m making it up? The man came back, I’m telling you. He drove up in his fancy carriage while you were working outside, and he rented the cottage for the rest of the summer.”

I had read about hearts soaring in novels, but I’d never known what it meant until then. I would have turned and run straight down to the cottage but my clothes were all sweaty and I had dirt beneath my fingernails.

“Does he want meals again?” I asked as I started pumping water into the sink to scrub up.

“He says there are two of them to feed this year. That’s why he paid me all this money.”

I suddenly knew what it meant to have your heart sink, also. Mine plummeted. “Two people? Who’s with him, Father?”

“His wife, I suppose.”

I took my time fixing lunch as I steeled myself to meet Walter’s wife. She would be a very beautiful woman, of course, and very elegantly dressed in fine linen and silk—no feed sack aprons or muslin petticoats for Mrs. Walter Gibson. Her skin wouldn’t be sun-browned and freckled like mine, either. Rich women always sat under parasols when they went out in the sun to preserve their delicate, porcelain complexions. And she would be thin—“slender as a reed,” a novelist would describe her—and every bit as graceful as one. I considered strapping on my bust-perfecto corset, just so she wouldn’t pity me, but I needed Lydia to help me man-handle the laces.

How could Walter bring his wife back to the place where we’d shared so many happy memories? I wondered as I finally carried the tray of food down to the cottage. Then I nearly turned around and ran

home when I realized the truth. Of course! Walter didn't know I was here! He thought I married Frank and moved out of my father's house. He would expect my sister or someone else to bring his meals, not me. I slowed my steps, searching for a way to avoid seeing him. I couldn't think of one.

As I emerged from the trees into the clearing, I saw Walter sitting all alone in a cane chair facing the pond. I drew a deep breath, trying to will back my tears at the wonderful sight of him. I had believed I'd never see him again. Then the cottage door opened and our second boarder came out onto the porch. It was his servant, Peter.

I was so relieved, so overjoyed, I nearly dropped the lunch tray. "Walter!" I called out to him as I hurried across the grass.

He turned and saw me. "Betsy? What a wonderful surprise!" He tried to smile but he appeared shaken. "I didn't realize you and your husband lived nearby."

"We don't. I didn't...I mean, I never got married! The engagement was called off!"

A slow smile spread across his face and the faint dimple I'd missed so much finally appeared. "Really? And all this time I've been imagining you reading *Pilgrim's Progress* over and over again.

I figured you must have memorized it by now."

I couldn't help laughing. "No, I've been free to read whatever I want...dozens and dozens of books. But what about you, Walter?"

"Me? I've read dozens of books, too."

I laughed again. "That's not what I meant and you know it! Are...are you married?"

"No. I'm afraid my poor health has prevented that."

"I'm sorry, Walter."

"I'm not." His eyes twinkled as the dimple in his cheek deepened. "And the young lady I was betrothed to certainly wasn't sorry, either. So it looks like we've both had a narrow escape from the bonds of

matrimony. Was your father very disappointed?”

“No, he got what he wanted—my sister married my fiance .” I laughed at the shocked look on his face “It’s a long story with a happy ending for everyone. Father’s land is part of Wyatt Orchards now.”

“That big establishment up on the hill?”

“Yes, and Father was finally able to retire. He lived to see the grandson who will inherit his land someday, so he’s a contented man.”

“And I guess in a way I could say the same thing about my father. Howard Knowles Gibson may not have his own son working beside him, but my sister has married well and her husband is being groomed to run the business in my place.”

“So you’re free to pursue your own dreams, Walter?”

“In a manner of speaking.” He gestured to his chair and I noticed for the first time that it was a wheelchair. “This contraption makes it pretty difficult for me to be the captain of a whaling ship—although I suppose I could still be a Hindu snake charmer.”

I felt awkward suddenly. I didn’t know what to say. I remembered the tray in my hands. “Well, here’s your lunch...and the food is getting colder by the minute. Would you like to have a picnic out here or shall I take it inside?”

“On a beautiful day like today, I think I’d like to eat out here. Bring the little folding table here, will you, Peter?”

I watched the servant fetch it, set it up, and arrange the food on it. I waited for Walter to invite me to stay and visit with him while he ate, like we always used to do, but he had grown very quiet. He looked down at the food, not at me. Peter pulled up a chair for himself but none for me. Neither man ate. They hadn’t even unfolded their napkins. The silence grew uncomfortable.

“Listen, I should go and let you eat in peace,” I said quickly. “Enjoy your meal.”

Walter didn’t argue with me. I ran back to the house to hide my

tears.

I was still sitting at the kitchen table with my face in my hands an hour later when someone knocked on the back door. It was Peter, returning the lunch tray. I ducked my head so he wouldn't see my swollen eyes and red nose.

"Thank you, Peter. You didn't have to walk all the way back here with that. I would have come for it."

"If you have a few minutes, miss," he said quietly, "Master Walter would like to speak with you. But he said I should not interrupt you if you were busy."

"I'm not busy. I'll...I'll be down in a few minutes."

I soaked a towel in cold well water and pressed it over my eyes. A quick look in the mirror showed me that it hadn't helped one bit. Lydia used to put cucumbers on her eyes after a late night out but it was too early in July for cucumbers. Would pickles work just as well? I fetched a jar from the pantry, then quickly decided it would make matters worse to arrive smelling like dill and vinegar.

Suddenly I had a flash of inspiration—I would tell Walter I had been reading a sad book! I quickly considered the possibilities and decided on *Les Misérables*. That story would bring tears to anyone's eyes, even a "tough nut" like Father or Frank Wyatt. I wished I had a copy of the book to tuck under my arm for credibility but I didn't own one. Instead, I practiced smiling in the mirror a few times, then set off down the path to the cottage.

Peter sat on the front step, whittling a chunk of wood. He quickly stood, bowing slightly when he saw me. "Master Walter is inside, miss. Please go in."

Walter sat in his wheelchair, bending over a box of books.

There were crates of books everywhere, as there had been last year, and a small daybed had been set up in the dining area for Peter.

Walter looked up when I entered. "I hope I'm not keeping you from

your work,” he said.

“Not at all. Father is napping and I was just reading Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*. It’s such a sad book, don’t you think?”

He studied me for a moment, then shook his head. “You’re not a very convincing liar, Betsy. I know I hurt your feelings earlier and I wanted to tell you how very sorry I am. Will you forgive me?” All I could do was nod. He smiled slightly, then looked away. “Thank you. I would love nothing more than to spend my mealtimes talking with you like we did last summer, but it’s awkward with Peter here. He’s my dinner companion and I feel obliged to converse with him. I hope you understand.”

I digested his words for a moment. “You’re not a very convincing liar, either,” I said. “I’ve never heard of a master dining with his servant before, much less feeling obliged to talk with him. Nor do I know many servants who would be comfortable sharing polite dinner conversation with their masters.”

He laid down the book he’d been examining and looked up at me in surprise. “Well, it just so happens,” he said, smiling slightly, “that I have been reading *Les Miserables*, too. ‘Down with the nobility!’ ‘Liberty and equality for the masses!’ I thought I would try putting it into practice with Peter.”

I began to laugh. And when I thought about what conclusions Walter might have reached if I’d arrived smelling of dill pickles, I laughed harder still. Without thinking, I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him.

“You make me so happy, Walter! Oh, how I’ve missed you!”

I pulled away again, suddenly shy. I looked at his beloved face, his soft gray eyes, and I saw the same love I felt for him reflected there. I knelt on the floor in front of him, and forgetting all caution, I spoke the words that I knew were true. “I love you, Walter.”

He reached out to caress my cheek. His hand quivered with palsy as

he lifted it. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I know. But we never should have fallen in love with each other. I never should have allowed it to happen." His hand dropped back into his lap.

"Why? Because you're rich and I'm poor? Because you've traveled all over the world and I've barely left Deer Springs? Or is it because you're handsome and charming and I'm plain and fat?"

He reached up again and brushed away my tears with unsteady fingers. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, Betsy."

He meant it! I saw it in his eyes, and the truth stunned me. Walter had looked inside my heart and he saw me as beautiful. A moment passed before I could speak.

"Then why?"

"Because I'm going to die."

"No you're not! Don't say such a terrible thing, don't even think it!"

"It's true, Betsy. My father has taken me to dozens of doctors, hired the finest specialists, sent me to all the best clinics here and abroad, and they've all said the same thing. The disease is progressing rapidly. All the other family members who've had these symptoms have died. There's no cure."

"Don't listen to them, Walter. I'll take care of you. I won't let you die."

"I've already accepted the truth," he said gently, taking my hand in his limp one. "I don't mind dying. I decided to come here to a secluded place to make it easier on my family. So they wouldn't have to watch me deteriorate. But now I'm hurting you. Now...I'll have to leave. And I'm so very sorry."

"Please don't leave me again," I whispered. "Please. Whatever time you have left, I want to spend it with you."

"I can't," he said, closing his eyes. "I can't. It hurts me too much...wanting to touch you, to kiss you, to hold you in my arms—and knowing that I can't do any of those things. And it's not fair to

you.”

“Why don’t you let me decide what’s fair? Leaving me isn’t fair!”

Walter silently shook his head. The sharp planes of his thin face, the dark circles that rimmed his eyes seemed much more prominent in the shadowy room.

I longed to throw myself into his arms again, to press my face to his and feel the roughness of his whiskers, to feel his breath on my cheek, his fingers in my hair. I wanted Walter to be the first man I ever kissed, the only man. But he turned his face away from me and called for his servant.

“Peter, I’m tired,” he said. “I need to lie down for a while.” I heard the bone-deep weariness in his voice. “Please go home now, Betsy.”

But I didn’t go. I couldn’t move. I watched Peter wheel Walter’s chair the short distance to the bedroom and remove the blanket that covered his legs. Then Peter lifted him into his arms like a child and laid him on the bed. I understood why Walter hadn’t allowed me to watch him eat. He could no longer feed himself. And I understood why he had allowed me to glimpse his helplessness now.

I waited until Peter wheeled the chair away, then I ran into the room and sat down on the bed beside him, bending to rest my head on his chest, my arms encircling his thin shoulders.

“My pain won’t go away if you leave me,” I wept. “You’ll only be gone from my life that much sooner. Please give me whatever time you have left,” I begged. “Please. That’s all I ask.”

He laid his hand on my hair. “Betsy...my love...don’t you understand? The weakness that started in my legs has left them paralyzed. Now it’s spreading to my arms and I can scarcely feed myself. Eventually it will affect all of my muscles. I’m already having trouble swallowing. But when the muscles that work my lungs become paralyzed, I’ll stop breathing. I’ll suffocate to death. I can’t put you through that ordeal or all that work.”



“It’s not work when you love someone. Please let me be the one who takes care of you, not Peter. If you’re really dying, then I want to stay beside you until you draw your very last breath.”

“And what will I do for you in return?” he asked sadly. “I’m a helpless invalid. I have nothing to give you.”

“Just give me yourself, your love. That’s all I want—”

“No.” He shook his head. “That’s not a loving relationship. Taking care of me will keep you from accomplishing your own dreams.”

I sat up so I could look into his eyes. “You’re wrong. You can help me accomplish my dreams. I want to write books. You can read what I’ve written. You can coach me and encourage me when I’m stuck. I value your opinion—even when you’re wrong.” I managed to smile, and he smiled in return as we remembered all our spirited arguments about the novels we’d read. “I don’t think I have the courage to write a book without you, Walter.”

I watched a tear slowly slip from the corner of his eye and run down his temple. He was silent for a long time as he studied my face.

“There’s a book of poetry over there on my dresser,” he finally said. “Read me the sonnet where the marker is, would you? It’s called ‘The First Day’ by Christina Rossetti.”

I rose to retrieve the book, then sank down beside him again to read it aloud.

I wish I could remember that first day,  
First hour, first moment of your meeting me,  
If dim or bright the season, it might be  
Summer or winter for aught I can say;  
So unrecorded did it slip away,  
So blind was I to see and to foresee,  
So dull to mark the budding of my tree  
That would not blossom yet for many a May.

If only I could recollect it, such  
A day of days! I let it come and go  
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;  
It seemed to mean so little, meant so much;  
If only I could now recall that touch,  
First touch of hand in hand—did one but know!

“ ‘Did one but know...’ ” he repeated when I finished reading. “Will you do something else for me, Betsy?”

“Anything.”

“Take your hairpins out and let your hair down, then take off your shoes and go barefoot.”

“Why?”

“That’s the way you looked ‘the first day, first hour, first moment of your meeting me.’ Miss Rossetti may not remember, but I’ll never forget it because that’s the day I fell in love with you.”

“You didn’t! I looked horrible that day!”

“No, you looked like an angel from a Da Vinci painting—a barefooted angel, quoting Henry David Thoreau, no less.” He smiled as he watched me pull out my hairpins. I shook my head until my hair fell loose, then I unbuttoned my shoes and kicked them off along with my socks.

“Does this mean that I can stay?” I asked when I finished. “And that you won’t leave me and go away again?”

“I’ll agree to let you stay on one condition.”

“I know—no ‘hovering.’ I’m not allowed to ask you how you’re feeling every two minutes.”

“Oh, that’s right, ‘no hovering.’ I’ll have to amend that to *two* conditions—‘no hovering’ is one, and the second is that you’ll marry me.” I stared at him, dumbfounded. “You see,” he continued, “I’ll be facing St. Peter at the pearly gates soon, and I don’t want to have a lot

of explaining to do about us living here together.”

I still couldn’t speak.

“Betsy?”

“Yes,” I said in a tiny voice.

“Please kiss me.”

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On the happiest day of my life, I married Walter Gibson. A justice of the peace performed the simple ceremony out by our pond. I went barefoot and wore a crown of wild roses in my bushy hair. Peter served as our best man and ring bearer, having shopped the day before for our two wedding bands. Lydia was my matron of honor, holding baby Matthew in her arms instead of a bouquet, and it was a toss-up as to which of those two bawled the most. The only other person who attended was Father, and he stood around in muddled bewilderment, wondering why a wealthy, intelligent man like Walter would marry someone like me. We honeymooned in our cottage to the accompaniment of hammers and saws as a crew of hired workmen quickly built and plumbed a new kitchen and bathroom addition.

“Hire as many laborers as you need,” Walter told the foreman, “but I want it finished in two weeks. Not one day longer. My bride and I need peace and quiet.”

They finished in thirteen days. Peter moved into the farmhouse with my father. He walked down to the cottage two or three times a day to help me lift Walter in and out of his wheelchair and get him dressed. Walter also hired a live-in maid named Helen to cook and clean for Peter and my father, and it was a happy ending for everyone when Helen and Peter fell in love and were married, too.

Walter and I settled into a blissful union that few married couples ever attain, even after many years of marriage. He was a tough taskmaster, though, making sure that I spent part of each day writing,

but afterward we would read to each other and talk and laugh and love. The workmen built a ramp off the front porch for Walter's wheelchair and we spent as much time outside as the weather allowed, watching the ducks and geese on the pond, the deer that came to the edge of the woods, the changing seasons in the orchard, and the panorama of stars in the night sky.

One warm summer night as we lay in bed, listening to the frogs and the crickets serenading each other down by the pond, Walter suddenly asked, "Did I ever tell you about my very first night in this cottage?"

"No, I don't think so," I said, nestling closer to him.

"I didn't sleep. Not one wink. That racket out by the pond! Oh! I'd never heard anything like it! I tore up a perfectly good linen handkerchief and tried stuffing little pieces of it in my ears, but I could still hear that confounded noise. When the frogs finally had mercy and called it quits, your fiendish rooster woke up and started cock-a-doodle-doing! If only I'd had a shotgun! Well, I made up my mind to leave that very next morning. I couldn't stand another night of all that infernal noise. Surely Henry David Thoreau was never kept awake the entire night at Walden Pond."

"What changed your mind?" I asked, laughing along with him.

"You did."

"Me?"

"You brought me my breakfast and you must have stayed up half the night yourself reading the book I'd loaned you because you could already discuss it as enthusiastically as if you had written it yourself. You looked so beautiful and fresh and alive, like a sweet, delicious peach picked right off the tree! I decided that I didn't care if the local fauna did keep me up all night, I was staying!"

"And I'll bet you don't even hear the frogs anymore, right?"

Walter laughed. "I wait until you're asleep before I stuff cotton in my ears."

“You know what, Walter?” I said with tears in my eyes. “No one in the whole world ever told me I was beautiful before.”

He turned to kiss my hair. “Then the whole world must be as blind as a bat.”

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Peter turned out to be an able carpenter, and since he had little else to do to occupy his time, he began lining the walls of our cottage with book shelves. As fast as he finished a shelf, I would load it with books and Walter would write to Chicago and ask his servants to send more of his collection. One day I unpacked a tattered set of leather-bound journals. Walter had printed his name on the title page and filled the contents from cover to cover with his neat handwriting. I opened the diary to the first entry:

Tuesday, June 23, 1884—Aboard the *S. S. Hibernia*:

I was born to the sea! Everything about it from the salt in the air to the cry of the sea birds makes me feel more alive and invigorated than I've ever felt in my life! I longed to pitch in with the men and cast off the hawsers and weigh the anchors as the tugboats nudged us out of the harbor in New Jersey yesterday, but the captain knows that my father is a major shareholder in this steamship line and he was intractable. I argued that I had captained the crew team at Yale, winning the college championship for the Bulldogs two years straight (and sending those despised Harvard boys home in defeat), but he insisted that he would not allow me to do anything that would jeopardize my life or his job. I then warned him that I might one day run the company in my father's place and I vowed to demote him to cabin boy, but he remained unmoved....

I laughed out loud and skipped ahead to the next entry:

Friday, June 27, 1884—aboard *The S. S. (Satan's Ship) Hibernia*:

I hate the sea! Everything about it from the relentless rocking to the savage swaying makes me feel more nauseated and ill than I've ever felt in my life! Little did I know

when the tugboats nudged us from the safety of the harbor in New Jersey four days ago that they were sending us into twenty-foot swells and gale force winds and a watery grave at the bottom of the sea! I long to pitch myself overboard and end my misery quickly, but the captain still won't allow me to do anything that would jeopardize my life or his job. He handed me a bucket, threatened to lock me in my stateroom if I didn't stay below deck, and assured me that I would live to see the port of Southampton, England, in two weeks' time. If I live to see Southampton, heaven knows I will surely die there because I will never step one foot aboard another ship....

"How did you ever get home again?" I asked Walter when I could stop laughing.

"Here, let me see that," he said from across the room. I handed him the diary, then knelt by his feet as he looked it over. "Ah, this is only my first journal. By the time I survived a derailed train in Europe and a deranged camel in Egypt, the sea seemed tame in comparison."

"I didn't know you could write."

"I should hope so. I'm a Yale graduate, you know."

"No, I didn't know that, either. And you used to be the captain of a crew team? What else haven't you told me about yourself?"

"The truth is all here in these journals. It's the unvarnished record of the three years I spent running from the responsibilities of adulthood."

"This sounds like good stuff," I said, taking the journal from him again and paging through it. "Does it tell how you explored new worlds, tamed savage tribes, and rescued several foreign princesses from pirates?"

"Not that I recall, but your version sounds like it would make a great adventure novel. You should write it someday, Betsy. No, these diaries mostly tell how I was bitten by a variety of savage insects, ate a good deal of very bad food, and traveled by every imaginable conveyance from rickshaw to yak back."

"Let's read these together," I said, settling comfortably against his

legs.

“What? And have you discover what a coward I really am? Not on your life!”

I thought of the unfaltering courage Walter showed every day in the face of a slow, certain death, and my eyes filled with tears. I turned away so he wouldn’t see them. “You’re the bravest man I’ve ever met, Walter. And we’re going to read these journals cover to cover. You’re going to take me with you to all these places because that’s the only way I’ll ever go there.”

Walter was a gifted storyteller. As summer turned to fall, I joined him on his exotic adventures in the jungles of Africa, the rain forests of Brazil, the pyramids of Egypt, and the gold fields of Alaska. His journal entries triggered even more memories, and I quickly scribbled them down in my own brand of shorthand as he reminisced. When he sent for his collection of National Geographic magazines, I saw photographs of many of the places he’d described. I had once dreamed of traveling around the world like Nellie Bly—now I traveled the world with Walter in our little cottage by the pond.

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I had been feeding Walter and shaving him ever since we were first married, but I’ll never forget the cold October day when I realized he could no longer move his arms. I had just read him one of the chapters I’d written, and when he told me it was superb I ran to his wheelchair and hugged him in joy. He couldn’t hug me in return.

“I’m sorry, Betsy,” he whispered.

“It’s all right. I know you love me. And I know you’d hug the stuffing out of me if you could.”

His embraces had always been weak, but it was a small death just the same. I would miss his caresses and the warmth of his arms around me—and in the years to come I would miss him entirely. But I

had already made up my mind I would never weep while Walter was alive. There would be time enough for tears all too soon.

I bought Walter a wooden music stand so he could prop up the books he wanted to read, and he learned to turn the pages by holding a rubber-tipped stick in his mouth. I would have gladly given up my novel-writing to spend every waking moment with him, but Walter refused to let me quit.

As the months passed, he eventually grew dissatisfied with the books on our shelves, new as well as old, and he asked for a Bible. He found such tremendous comfort in reading it that we began reading it and discussing it together, just as we had discussed so many other books. But I was angry with God for what He was doing to Walter, and I found no comfort at all in what I read. It took my husband's patient explanations, his quiet, steadfast faith, to help me see what he alone saw on those sacred pages.

"Listen to this, Walter. It says 'whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.' That means if we pray and believe that you'll get well—"

"No, Betsy. God isn't a genie inside a magic lamp whom you can pray to and get all your wishes. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' That's because in heaven the angels do God's bidding without question. They rejoice to do His will, and we need to do the same."

"But what if I don't like His will? What if I don't agree with it?"

"Well, God gave us free choice. We don't *have* to serve Him." He leaned his head back against the chair and sighed. "You know, all my life I felt that way about working for my father. His will must be done, whether I agreed with it or not. I had to do his bidding without question. Our heavenly Father never forces us to serve Him...but do you know what? God really *does* know what's best for us. He created us. His perfect will is perfect for us, whether we can understand it



with our limited minds or not. Even so, He allows each of us to decide: Will we choose our own way or maybe society's way—and end up settling for less than perfection? Or will we let God take us where He has chosen—and be amazed?"

I stood behind Walter's chair and rested my cheek against his hair. "I don't like where He's taking you."

"Do you know why we constantly fight the notion of death, Betsy? I just read about that in Genesis the other day. It's because God created us to live forever with Him in Eden. Death was not God's choice; it was man's. Death is unnatural, a punishment for sin. But God countered man's choice with another perfect plan— He redeemed us in Christ so we could live forever with Him."

I moved around to the front of his chair and held Walter's precious face in my hands. "And in the meantime? Here on earth?"

"We must pray, 'Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.' Promise me that you'll always write, Betsy. Don't let your father or anyone else impose his will on you. And don't ever settle for any other life except the one for which God created you."

"What about His will for you?" I whispered. I couldn't speak any louder without weeping.

"The same thing," he said. "We'll pray for God's will to be done—whether it means that I live or I die. And we'll pray that He'll grant us the grace to accept it."

I kissed his forehead, his eyebrows, the knuckles of his hands.

"Why did God have to make our lives so fragile and so short?"

Walter thought for a moment before answering. "Because life is very precious to Him. He treasures each life He created and He wants us to treasure it, too—like fine porcelain china. God knows what it's like to live and die in a frail human body like ours. His Son suffered physical death, Betsy, so that you and I can face it without ever being afraid."

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Walter's paralysis inevitably spread, just as the doctors had warned it would. He lost weight as it became more and more difficult for him to swallow. It required an enormous effort for him to talk, and his speech became so slurred, I would soon be the only person who could understand him.

"I want you to write to Chicago and ask my father's lawyer to come," he told me one dark winter morning. "Then arrange for a local lawyer to meet with us at the same time. Do you know of any good lawyers in this area?"

"There's John Wakefield, here in Deer Springs. He took over his father's practice about ten years ago."

"Good. Ask him to come."

I knew that Walter wanted to prepare his will, but I couldn't bring myself to say the word out loud when I contacted the two lawyers. They met alone with Walter in our bedroom and it was one of the very few times I ever left his side. They talked together for about three hours, then John Wakefield emerged to ask Peter and me to come in and witness the signing. Of course Walter could no longer sign his name. I held back bitter tears as my once vibrant husband held a pen between his teeth to draw an X on the appropriate line.

"Thank you, Betsy, for not leaving me alone to die," Walter said as I held him in my arms that night. "Thank you for demanding your own way. I don't know how I ever deserved your love...but I feel sorry for any man who has to die alone."

After the lawyers came and left, Walter no longer insisted that I work on my novel. It remained in the bedroom bureau drawer where I'd left it so that I could spend every last moment with him. As the snow piled in deep drifts outside our cottage windows one afternoon, he asked me to read the scenes from the Gospels that told of Christ's death and resurrection. When I got to the part where Jesus met the

disciples on the road to Emmaus, Walter interrupted me.

“Do you know why they didn’t recognize Him?” he asked.

“No, why?”

“Because Jesus’ body wasn’t ‘revived’ from the dead like Lazarus’ body had been. He was resurrected. They didn’t recognize Him because His resurrected body was as different from his physical body as an apple is from an apple seed. He was changed.

That’s what Paul meant in Corinthians when he wrote about the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown in weakness will be raised in power; it’s sown a natural body, but it’s raised a spiritual body.”

Walter must have known by my lack of response, my failure to even debate the Scriptures with him, that my faith and hope were as paralyzed as his limbs. I watched him struggle, with what little strength he had, to find a way to help me see.

“Look at those trees outside our window, Betsy. If you never saw spring before, you would lose hope, you would chop them all down, believing they’re dead. But spring will come again. They will blossom again and bear fruit. I’m in the winter of my life, and you’re looking at my dying body and seeing it like those trees, without hope. But in Christ, new life will come. Jesus said, ‘Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.’ This isn’t the end. You and I will live for all eternity.”

“That won’t stop me from missing you,” I said, battling my tears.

“I know. When I left you last summer and went back to Chicago, I couldn’t see you but you were alive in my heart because I pictured you making your home in a new place, married and going on with your life. And even though you couldn’t see me, you imagined me living in Chicago, going to work each day, riding home in my carriage every evening. It will be the same after I leave you this time, too. You can keep me alive in your heart because I’ll still be alive in eternity.

I'm simply making my home in a different place."

I lost the battle to hold back my tears. I lay down beside him on the bed and pressed my face tightly against his. "I'll never stop loving you!" I wept. "Never!"

"Nor I you, for all eternity. Watch the trees, Betsy. When you see the blossoms you'll know I'm with Christ...and that I'm alive forever. And some day these dry, dead limbs of mine will blossom with resurrection life."

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A few short weeks later I knew the end was very near. Walter's breathing had become painfully labored. It made my own chest ache to hear him struggle, but he never complained. I held him in my arms and talked to him, read to him, sang to him, keeping my own panic at bay so he wouldn't suffer the terror of slow suffocation. The night before he died he strained to speak to me one last time.

"Go into the orchard every spring, Betsy....Look at the flowers....They're God's promise that we'll see each other again."

I was holding Walter in my arms when he drew his last breath. He held it for a moment, then simply exhaled, like a quiet sigh of relief. And he was gone.

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The next morning I sent for John Wakefield. He told me that Walter had arranged with a local undertaker to ship his body home to his family. They buried him in Chicago. I didn't go to the funeral. I couldn't watch them put Walter in that box and lower it into the cold ground.

I'd like to say that I handled Walter's death well, that I was prepared for it and I didn't grieve as those who have no hope. But it isn't true. I sank into a dark place where no light could reach me. It

was winter outside my window and winter deep in my soul. When my tears were gone I grieved without tears.

Lydia held me in her arms and tried to console me with her love, but it was as if she stood outside my shuttered cottage, peering through the windows in vain. I couldn't open the door to her or anyone else.

And then on a warm spring morning the cherry trees blossomed, just as Walter knew they would. One day the orchard appeared dead and lifeless, the next day I looked out my window and didn't recognize the view. The trees' beauty beckoned to me, whispered to me, until I found myself outside, standing beneath clusters of fragrant pink flowers. At that moment I knew two truths with absolute certainty. Walter was alive. And God was here, with me.

I met God in the orchard that morning—not in a tangible form you could see or hear, but I felt His presence comforting me the way I could once sense the comfort of Walter's presence when we sat in the same room, even with my back turned to him. God seemed to say, "When everything else is gone, I'm still here."

And I knew then that I wanted to do God's bidding—on earth as it is in heaven—because I would never find the peace that Walter had found unless I did. I wanted to live my life according to God's plan, not other people's plans—to become the person He created me to be. God changed my name that morning. People think a woman who isn't married, who lives with her father and writes books, and who wanders around in a cherry orchard talking to God must be crazy. Surely she has a few "bats in her belfry!" But I would be the woman God wanted me to be. And so He changed my name to Batty.

The first thing I did when I finally went back inside the cottage that morning was to open the bedroom drawer to retrieve my neglected manuscript. Except when I opened the drawer, it wasn't there. Instead, I found a note:

*Dear Missus Gibson,*

*I didnt steel this book frum you. Master Walter tole me to write this note and explane that he sent it to a publishur. He sed to tell you its redly but he nos you wood never send it your self so he axed his lawyer to do it.*

*Peter*

*PS-He sed to add I love you (frum him, not me) and to tell you to start writing another book.*

About a month later, John Wakefield arrived at my door. I had closed up the cottage and moved back into the farmhouse with Father once Peter and his wife had returned home to Chicago.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Gibson,” John said, tipping his hat. “How are you today?”

“I’m fine, John. What’s all that stuff in the back of your wagon? You aren’t moving away from Deer Springs, are you?”

“No,” he chuckled, “This is your furniture, not mine. Where would you like it delivered?”

“Mine? What is it? Where did it come from?” I walked over to the wagon and lifted the tarpaulin to peer beneath it. Mr. Wakefield followed me.

“According to the terms of your late husband’s will, he wanted you to have the desk and chair he used when he worked for his father. And he asked that I also purchase a typewriting machine for you.”

The desk was made of cherry wood, with brass drawer pulls and a polished top that gleamed like a mirror in the sunlight. “It’s enormous!” I said.

“Yes, it’s a beauty, all right. I wish I could afford a desk like that for my office.”

The Remington typewriting machine looked incredibly complicated

compared to a simple pen and paper. “Oh dear, John. I haven’t the faintest idea how to use that thing.”

He smiled as he rested his briefcase on the wagon wheel and pulled a sheaf of papers from it. “Mr. Gibson said to tell you, and I quote—‘Learn how, Betsy. Your handwriting is atrocious’—end quote.”

I laughed and wept at this message from Walter. It seemed to come from beyond the grave. “Were there any other orders from the boss?” I asked as I wiped a tear.

“Yes, he retained my services as your lawyer.” Mr. Wakefield was trying to balance the briefcase and sift through the papers at the same time. I steered him to a chair on the front porch so his papers wouldn’t end up scattered to the four winds.

“Mr. Gibson requested that I protect your interests,” he continued, “especially once you start receiving book contracts. I am to examine all your contracts thoroughly before you sign any of them.”

“You mean *if* I receive one.”

“No, Mr. Gibson seemed quite confident that you would. That’s why he paid me in advance.” He dug into the briefcase at his feet and handed me a thick, closed folio. “You’ll want to keep this in a safe place, Mrs. Gibson. It’s the title and deed to your house.”

“My house?”

“Yes, the little stone one down by the pond. Mr. Gibson arranged to purchase it from your father along with two acres of land. He intended to purchase the pond as well, but that belongs to Frank Wyatt and he refused to sell it—in spite of the very generous offer Mr. Gibson made him.” Mr. Wakefield dug into the briefcase again and retrieved another packet of papers. He handed them to me.

“What’s all this?”

“These papers explain the details of the trust fund your husband provided for your support. The principal will be held in a bank in Chicago, but a very generous monthly living allowance from the

interest payments will be deposited to an account that he set up for you here at the Deer Springs Savings and Loan. There are no restrictions whatsoever on that account. You may spend as much as you like, for whatever you like.”

Mr. Wakefield’s eyes grew misty as he saw the tears rolling down my cheeks. He leaned over to take me in his arms and awkwardly patted my back. “He loved you a great deal, Betsy...and he left you very well-provided for.”

Walter had a few more surprises for me. About six months after he died, I found a letter addressed to Betsy Gibson in my mailbox one morning from a New York publishing company. My hands trembled so badly as I slit it open that I nicked myself with the letter opener. I left bright red drops of blood on it as I read:

*Dear Mrs. Gibson,*

*Congratulations. Your manuscript has been accepted for publication...*

When I finally stopped whooping and shouting and dancing long enough to read the rest of it, I realized that Walter must have dictated a cover letter to accompany my manuscript when he submitted it. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I read the publisher’s words: *We also like your idea for a series of books for young ladies and would like to contract you to write four more novels....*

“A series!” I cried out loud. “What on earth were you thinking, Walter?”

Of course, the series of books I wrote under my married name was published and became very popular. Then about two years later, when Father had his last stroke and became bedridden, I decided to read Walter’s travel journals aloud to him in the evenings. When I opened the first page, I was stunned to find another note from Walter,



misspelled by Peter:

*Dear Missus Gibson,*

*Master Walter sed to tell you that boys like exciting stories too and that you shud write sum. He sed he always wanted to be a brave hero and so plese make him a hansum one.*

*Peter*

*PS—He sed he loves you and dont forget that he rescues the princesses from the pie-rats.*

The first adventure story I wrote for boys began aboard the *S. S. Hibernia* as it sailed the high seas in twenty-foot swells and gale-force winds. Unlike Walter, the intrepid hero did not require a bucket. My publisher loved the book, but he thought the series' author needed a masculine name. I chose "Herman Walters" in honor of my favorite teacher, Mr. Herman, and my real-life hero, my husband, Walter Gibson.

These books became every bit as popular as the girls' series, and I lived "happily ever after" as they say, caring for my aging father and writing books in my secret writing haven in the cottage by the pond. Few people in Deer Springs ever knew I was an author.

After Father died I continued living in the farmhouse and writing down in the cottage, often until after midnight. If I needed to research a scene in one of my adventure stories, I would sometimes put on one of Walter's old suits and tramp around in the woods by the pond to experience what it felt like for my hero to sneak around in the jungle in the dark. That's what I was doing the night my father's house burned down. I was on my way back to the farmhouse when I saw Frank Wyatt run out of my back door and hurry up the hill. A moment later I heard a big *whoosh* and flames shot out of my farmhouse windows.

Of course, there weren't any telephones or anything, so the house

burned to the ground before the volunteer firefighters could do much about it. I knew why Frank had done it. My father had deeded the house and his last few acres of land to me, but if I died without an heir, it would become part of Wyatt Orchards. Lydia had already died by that time, so Frank burned the house, hoping I would die, too. But I shocked the socks off Frank when I emerged from the woods still wearing Walter's suit and stood beside him as the firemen doused the smoldering wreckage.

"Betty! You...you're alive!"

"Surprised, aren't you, Frank?"

"I...you...I thought..."

"I'm sure they'll never suspect that you were the arsonist."

Even in the dim light I saw his face turn pale. "W... what are you talking about?"

"I saw you do it, Frank. You were hoping to kill me, weren't you?"

"Kill you! You're mad as a hatter!"

"Fine. You can tell the whole world I'm your crazy spinster sister-in-law if that makes you happy. And you can have the last of my father's land, too. But I own the cottage and the two acres it sits on. They will never belong to you, Frank. Never. The deed is in my name."

Frank Wyatt never spoke a single word to me after that night.

# DEEL IV

## Tannie Batty se verhaal

*Deer Springs 1895*

Elke grashalm het sy engel wat oor hom buk en fluister: “Groei, groei!”

Die Talmoed

## ~ Hoofstuk elf ~

My pa se huis is baie stil nadat Lydia met Frank Wyatt getroud is en uitgetrek het. Ek mis haar baie. In die lang wintersaande is dit net ek en Pa – en hy was nog nooit een om met woorde te mors nie. Frank kry ’n meisie van die dorp om Lydia met die huiswerk en die nuwe baba te kom help, maar Lydia is steeds te besig om gereeld by my te kom kuier. Ek skryf halfhartig ’n paar gedigte en stories, maar sonder my suster se aanmoediging ontbreek my selfvertroue om dit weg te stuur sodat dit gepubliseer kan word. Die jaar gaan stadig verby.

Die volgende lente gebruik ek al my kreatiewe energie om vir my en Pa ’n groentetuin aan te plant. Ek raak gou ontslae van die wintermaande se neerslagtigheid terwyl ek die sade plant en dit dan versorg en koester terwyl ek sien hoe dit groei. Op een warm dag vroeg in Julie is ek die hele oggend in die tuin besig toe Pa my skielik rondom middagete na binne roep.

“Betty, kom hier. Dit is tyd om middagete te maak.”

Ek doen my bes om nie toe te laat dat sy baasspelerigheid my irriteer nie. Dit is maar hoe Pa is. Die son is in elk geval nou te warm om nog onkruid uit te trek. Ek hang my strooihoed aan die hakkie langs die deur en wag totdat my oë aan die donkerder lig binne-in die huis gewoon raak. Toe ek mooi kan sien, kan ek my oë nie glo nie. Pa sit by die kombuistafel en geld tel asof hy ’n Wall Street-bankier is. Daar is ’n groot stapel kontant voor hom op die tafel.

“Waar kom al dié geld vandaan?” vra ek.

“Ons het weer huurders.”

“Huurders? Bedoel Pa nou dat iemand die kothuis huur?”

“Ja, daardie Gibson-ou het teruggekom. Hy het hierdie keer vir twee maande betaal.”

Verbasing slaan my asem weg. Ek staar na my pa, bang om hom te glo, bang om te veel te hoop. “Regtig?” kry ek dit uiteindelik uit.

Dit irriteer Pa dat ek hom bevraagteken. “Dink jy ek suig dit uit my duim? Ek sê mos vir jou die man het teruggekom. Hy het met sy spoggerige perdekar hier aangekom terwyl jy buite gewerk het en hy het die kothuis vir die res van die somer gehuur.”

Ek het al in romans gelees van harte wat sweef, maar eers in hierdie oomblik weet ek self wat dit beteken. Ek storm amper by die huis uit en

hardloop reguit af kothuis toe, maar my klere is sweterig en daar is grond onder my naels.

“Wil hy weer etes ook hê?” vra ek terwyl ek water in die kombuis se wasbak tap sodat ek kan was.

“Hy sê hulle is hierdie jaar twee wat wil eet. Dit is hoekom hy so baie betaal het.”

Ek weet skielik ook wat dit beteken as jou hart tot in jou skoene sak. Myne val teen ’n hoë spoed. “Twee mense? Wie is saam met hom hier, Pa?”

“Seker maar sy vrou.”

Ek vat my tyd met die middagete sodat ek myself kan staal vir die ontmoeting met Walter se vrou. Sy sal natuurlik ’n baie aantreklike vrou wees en baie elegant geklee in linne en sy – geen voersak-voorskote of moeseliënrokke vir mevrou Walter Gibson nie. Haar vel sal ook nie so songebrand en besproet soos myne wees nie. Ryk vroue sit altyd onder sambrele wanneer hulle in die son buitetoegaan om hulle delikate, porseleinagtige velkleur in stand te hou. Sy sal maer ook wees; “slank soos ’n riet” sal ’n romanskrywer haar beskryf, en net so grasieus soos een. Ek oorweeg dit om my verslankende korset aan te trek net sodat sy my nie sal jammer kry nie, maar ek het vir Lydia nodig om my met die inryg en styftrek van die toutjies te help.

*Hoe kan Walter sy vrou terugbring na die plek waar ons soveel gelukkige herinneringe deel?* wonder ek toe ek uiteindelik met die skinkbord kos afstap kothuis toe. Dan draai ek byna om en hardloop huis toe wanneer ek uiteindelik besef wat aangaan. Natuurlik! Walter weet nie ek is hier nie. Hy dink ek is met Frank getroud en bly nie meer in my pa se huis nie. Hy sal verwag dat my suster of iemand anders sy etes bring, nie ek nie. Ek loop stadiger, op soek na ’n manier om hom te vermy. Ek kan aan niks dink nie.

Toe ek tussen die bome uit tot in die oopte stap, sien ek Walter alleen op ’n rottangstoel sit wat oor die dam uitkyk. Ek trek my asem diep in en onderdruk die tranes wat skielik oor my wange wil loop. Ek het geglo dat ek hom nooit weer sal sien nie. Dan gaan die kothuis se deur oop en ons tweede huurder kom op die stoep uitgestap. Dit is sy bediende, Peter.

Ek is so verlig dat ek byna die skinkbord laat val. “Walter!” roep ek uit terwyl ek haastig oor die gras loop.

Hy draai om en sien my. “Betsy? Wat ’n wonderlike verrassing!” Hy probeer glimlag, maar hy lyk geskok. “Ek het nie besef jy en jou man woon hier naby nie.”

“Ons doen nie. Ek het nie ... Ek bedoel, ek is nooit getroud nie. Die verlowing is verbreek.”

’n Glimlag breek stadig oor sy lippe en die sagte kuiltjie wat ek so gemis het, verskyn uiteindelik. “Regtig? En ek het my nog die hele tyd ingedink hoe jy *Pilgrim’s Progress* oor en oor sit en lees. Ek het gedink jy het dit teen hierdie tyd gememoriseer.”

Ek kan nie anders as om te lag nie. “Nee, ek is vry om te lees net wat ek wil ... dosyne boeke. Maar wat van jou, Walter?”

“Ek? Ek het ook al dosyne boeke gelees.”

Ek lag weer. “Dit is nie wat ek bedoel het nie en jy weet dit. Is ... Is jy getroud?”

“Nee. Ek is bevrees my slegte gesondheid het dit verhoed.”

“Ek is jammer, Walter.”

“Ek is nie.” Sy oë glinster en die kuiltjie in sy wang verdiep. “Die jong dame aan wie ek verloof was, is beslis ook nie jammer nie. Dit lyk dus of ons al twee ’n noue ontcoming gehad het wat die bande van die eg betref. Was jou pa baie teleurgesteld?”

“Nee, hy het gekry wat hy wou gehad het. My suster is met my verloofde getroud.” Ek lag oor die geskokte uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Dit is ’n lang storie met ’n gelukkige einde vir almal. Pa se grond is nou deel van Wyatt-boorde.”

“Daardie groot boerdery op die heuwel?”

“Ja, en Pa kon uiteindelik aftree. Hy het geleef om die kleinseun te sien wat eendag sy grond sal erf. Hy is ’n tevrede man.”

“Ek kan seker dieselfde oor my pa ook sê. Howard Knowles Gibson se eie seun werk dalk nie sy aan sy saam met hom nie, maar my suster het ’n goeie huwelik aangegaan en haar man word nou opgelei om die besigheid in my plek te bestuur.”

“Is jy dan nou vry om jou eie drome na te streef, Walter?”

“By wyse van spreke.” Hy beduie na sy stoel en ek besef nou eers dit is ’n rolstoel. “Hierdie gedoente maak dit nogal moeilik vir my om die kaptein van ’n walvisvaarder te wees, alhoewel ek seker nog ’n Hindoe-slangbesweerder kan word.”

Ek voel skielik ongemaklik. Ek weet nie wat om te sê nie. Dan onthou ek van die skinkbord wat ek vashou. “Wel, hier is jou middagete ... en die kos raak by die minuut al hoe kouer. Wil jy hier buite piekniek hou of moet ek dit binnetoe vat?”

“Op ’n pragtige dag soos vandag sal ek graag hier buite wil eet. Peter, sal jy asseblief die klein opslaantafeltjie hierheen bring?”

Ek kyk hoe die bediende dit gaan haal, dit opslaan en die kos daarop neersit. Ek wag vir Walter om my te nooi om met hom te gesels terwyl hy eet

– soos ons altyd gemaak het – maar hy is skielik baie stil. Hy kyk na die kos voor hom, nie na my nie. Peter trek vir homself ’n stoel nader, maar nie vir my nie. Nie een van die twee begin eet nie. Hulle maak nie eens hulle servette oop nie. Die stilte word ongemaklik.

“Luister, ek moet seker gaan en julle in vrede laat eet,” sê ek vinnig. “Smaaklike ete.”

Walter probeer my nie keer nie. Ek hardloop terug huis toe om my trane weg te steek.

Ek sit steeds by die kombuistafel met my kop in my hande toe iemand aan die agterdeur klop. Dit is Peter wat die skinkbord terugbring. Ek laat sak my kop sodat hy nie my geswelde oë en rooi neus moet sien nie.

“Dankie, Peter. Dit was nie nodig vir jou om al die pad hiernatoe te loop nie. Ek sou dit kom haal het.”

“As jy ’n paar minute het, juffrou,” sê hy sag, “wil meneer Walter graag met jou praat. Hy het egter gesê ek moet jou nie onderbreek indien jy besig is nie.”

“Ek is nie besig nie. Ek ... ek sal oor ’n paar minute kom.”

Ek week ’n handdoek in koue water uit die put en druk dit oor my oë. ’n Vinnige kyk in die spieël sê vir my dit het net mooi niks gehelp nie. Lydia het altyd komkommer op haar oë gesit wanneer sy ’n aand laat uit was, maar dit is te vroeg in Julie vir komkommers. Sal agurkies net so goed werk? Ek gaan haal ’n bottel uit die spens uit en besluit dan gou dit sal dinge net vererger indien ek daar aankom en na dille en asyn ruik.

Skielik kry ek ’n blink idee. Ek sal vir Walter sê ek het ’n hartseer boek gesit en lees. Ek oorweeg vinnig die moontlikhede en besluit op *Les Misérables*. Dié verhaal sal enigiemand laat huil, selfs ’n “taai toffie” soos Pa of Frank Wyatt. Ek wens ek het ’n eksemplaar van die boek gehad om ter wille van geloofwaardigheid onder my arm in te druk, maar ek besit nie een nie. Ek oefen gou ’n paar keer in die spieël om mooi te glimlag en vat dan die paadjie af kothuis toe.

Peter sit op die voorstoep se trap terwyl hy ’n groot stuk hout sit en kerf. Hy staan vinnig op en buig liggies toe hy my sien. “Meneer Walter is binne, juffrou. Gaan asseblief in.”

Walter sit in sy rolstoel en buk oor ’n boks vol boeke. Daar is oral kratte vol boeke, net soos verlede jaar, en in die eetkamer is ’n klein bedjie vir Peter opgeslaan.

Walter kyk op toe ek binnekom. “Ek hoop ek hou jou nie uit die werk uit nie,” sê hy.

“Glad nie. Pa het gaan lê en ek het Victor Hugo se *Les Misérables* gesit en

lees. Dit is so 'n hartseer boek, of hoe?"

Hy kyk vir 'n rukkies na my en skud dan sy kop. "Jy is nie 'n baie oortuigende leuenaar nie, Betsy. Ek weet ek het vroeër jou gevoelens seergemaak en ek wil vir jou sê hoe jammer ek is. Sal jy my vergewe?" Ek kan net knik. Hy glimlag flou en kyk dan weg. "Dankie. Niks sal vir my lekkerder wees as om my etenstye saam met jou deur te bring en te gesels soos verlede somer nie, maar dit voel vreemd met Peter hier. Hy eet saam met my en ek voel verplig om met hom te gesels. Ek hoop jy verstaan."

Ek oorweeg sy woorde vir 'n oomblik. "Jy is ook nie 'n baie oortuigende leuenaar nie," sê ek. "Ek het nog nooit voorheen gehoor van 'n meester wat saam met sy bediende eet nie, wat nog te sê verplig voel om met hom te gesels. Ek ken ook nie baie bediendes wat gemaklik sal wees daarmee om oor 'n ete 'n gesprek met hulle meester te voer nie."

Hy sit die boek neer wat hy in sy hande hou en kyk verbaas op na my. "Wel, dit is nou toevallig so," sê hy en glimlag, "dat ek ook *Les Misérables* gelees het. 'Down with the nobility!' 'Liberty and equality for the masses!' Ek het gedink ek sal dit met Peter daadwerklik probeer uitelef."

Ek begin lag. Toe ek dink aan die gevolgtrekkings wat Walter sou gemaak het as ek wel soos agurkies geruik het, lag ek nog harder. Sonder om te dink gooi ek my arms om sy nek en druk hom.

"Jy maak my so gelukkig, Walter. Ek het jou vreeslik gemis."

Dan los ek hom, skielik skaam. Ek kyk na sy geliefde gesig, sy sagte grys oë, en ek sien dieselfde liefde wat ek vir hom voel daarin blink. Ek kniel voor hom op die vloer en sê dan met vrymoedigheid die woorde wat ek weet waar is. "Ek is lief vir jou, Walter."

Hy steek sy hand uit om oor my wang te streel. Sy hand bewe toe hy dit oplig. "Ja," sê hy. "Ja, ek weet. Ons twee moes egter nooit verlief geraak het op mekaar nie. Ek moes dit nooit toegelaat het om te gebeur nie." Sy hand val weer tot op sy skoot.

"Hoekom? Omdat jy ryk is en ek arm? Omdat jy die wêreld deurreis het en ek Deer Springs skaars verlaat het? Of is dit omdat jy aantreklik en sjarmant is en ek eenvoudig en vet?"

Hy lig weer sy hand en vee my trane met bewende vingers af. "Jy is die heel mooiste vrou wat ek nog ooit ontmoet het, Betsy."

Hy bedoel dit! Ek sien dit in sy oë en die waarheid slaan my stom. Walter het tot binne-in my hart gekyk en hy vind my pragtig. 'n Oomblik gaan verby voordat ek kan praat.

"Nou hoekom dan?"

"Want ek gaan sterf."



“Nee, jy gaan nie. Moenie so ’n aaklige ding sê nie. Moet dit nie eers dink nie!”

“Dit is waar, Betsy. My pa het my na dosyne dokters toe geneem, die beste spesialiste gekry, my na al die beste klinieke hier en oorsee gestuur, en hulle almal sê dieselfde ding. Die siekte verloop baie vinnig. Al die ander familieleden wat hierdie simptome gehad het, is dood. Dit kan nie genees word nie.”

“Moenie na hulle luister nie, Walter. Ek sal vir jou sorg. Ek sal nie toelaat dat jy doodgaan nie.”

“Ek het reeds die waarheid aanvaar,” sê hy sagkens en vou sy slap hand om myne. “Dit pla my nie dat ek gaan sterf nie. Ek het besluit om hier na ’n afgesonderde plek toe te kom sodat dit vir my familie makliker sal wees. Sodat hulle nie hoef te sien hoe ek agteruitgaan nie. Maar nou maak ek jou seer. Nou ... sal ek moet weggaan. Ek is vreeslik jammer.”

“Moet asseblief nie weer van my af weggaan nie,” fluister ek. “Asseblief. Dit maak nie saak hoeveel tyd jy oor het nie, ek wil dit graag saam met jou deurbring.”

“Ek kan nie,” sê hy en maak sy oë toe. “Ek kan nie. Dit maak my te seer ... Ek wil jou aanraak, jou soen, jou in my arms hou, maar ek weet ek kan niks daarvan doen nie. Dit is nie regverdig teenoor jou nie.”

“Hoekom laat jy my nie self besluit wat regverdig is nie? Dit is nie regverdig om my alleen te los nie.”

Walter skud net sy kop. Die skerp hoeke van sy maer gesig, die donker kringe om sy oë is baie duideliker in die skemer vertrek.

Ek smag daarna om myself weer in sy arms te gooi, my gesig teenaan syne te druk en die grofheid van sy baard te voel, sy asem teen my wang, sy vingers in my hare. Ek wil hê Walter moet die eerste man wees wat ek ooit sal soen, die enigste man. Hy draai egter sy gesig van my af weg en roep sy bediende.

“Peter, ek is moeg,” sê hy. “Ek moet vir ’n rukkie gaan lê.” Ek hoor die absolute vermoeienis in sy stem. “Gaan asseblief nou huis toe, Betsy.”

Maar ek gaan nie. Ek kan nie beweeg nie. Ek kyk hoe Peter Walter se rolstoel die kort entjie na die slaapkamer toe stoot en die kombes van sy bene af haal. Dan tel Peter hom soos ’n kind in sy arms op en lê hom op sy bed neer. Ek verstaan nou hoekom Walter nie wou hê ek moet hom sien eet nie. Hy het iemand nodig om hom te help. Ek verstaan ook hoekom hy my nou toelaat om sy hulpeloosheid te sien.

Ek wag totdat Peter die stoel weggestoot het. Dan hardloop ek die kamer binne en gaan sit langs hom op die bed. Ek gaan lê met my kop op sy bors en

vou my arms om sy skraal skouers.

“My pyn sal nie weggaan as jy my verlaat nie,” huil ek. “Jy sal dan net soveel gouer uit my lewe verdwyn. Gee asseblief vir my die tyd wat jy oorhet,” smeek ek. “Asseblief. Dit is al wat ek vra.”

Hy laat rus sy hand op my hare. “Betsy ... my lief ... Verstaan jy dan nie? Die swakheid wat in my bene begin het, het dit verlam gelaat. Nou versprei dit na my arms en ek kan skaars self eet. Dit sal uiteindelik al my spiere aantast. Ek ondervind reeds probleme wanneer ek sluk. Wanneer die spiere in my longe egter verlam raak, sal ek ophou asemhaal. Ek sal versmoor. Ek kan jou nie deur soveel werk of so 'n ervaring laat gaan nie.”

“Dit is nie werk wanneer jy iemand liefhet nie. Laat ek asseblief die een wees wat jou versorg, nie Peter nie. As jy regtig besig is om te sterf, wil ek by jou wees totdat jy jou laaste asem uitblaas.”

“Wat sal ek dan in ruil daarvoor vir jou doen?” vra hy hartseer. “Ek is 'n hulpelose invalide. Ek het niks om jou te bied nie.”

“Gee net jouself vir my, jou liefde. Dit is al wat ek wil – ”

“Nee.” Hy skud sy kop. “Dit is nie 'n liefdevolle verhouding nie. As jy my moet versorg, sal dit jou daarvan weerhou om jou eie drome te vervul.”

Ek sit regop sodat ek hom in sy oë kan kyk. “Jy is verkeerd. Jy kan my help om my drome te vervul. Ek wil boeke skryf. Jy kan lees wat ek geskryf het. Jy kan my lei en aanmoedig wanneer ek vashaak. Ek heg waarde aan jou opinie, selfs wanneer jy verkeerd is.” Ek glimlag flou en hy glimlag ook toe ons terugdink aan al ons vurige argumente oor die boeke wat ons al gelees het. “Ek dink nie ek het die moed om sonder jou 'n boek te skryf nie, Walter.”

Ek kyk hoe 'n traan in die hoek van sy oog vorm en dan oor sy slaap rol. Hy is vir 'n lang ruk stil terwyl hy stip na my gesig kyk.

“Daar is 'n digbundel op my spieëlkas,” sê hy. “Lees vir my die sonnet waar die boekmerk is, asseblief. Die titel is ‘The First Day’ deur Christina Rossetti.”

Ek staan op om die boek te gaan haal en kom sit dan weer langs hom voordat ek hardop begin lees.

I wish I could remember that first day,  
First hour, first moment of your meeting me,  
If dim or bright the season, it might be  
Summer or winter for aught I can say;  
So unrecorded did it slip away,  
So blind was I to see and to foresee,  
So dull to mark the budding of my tree  
That would not blossom yet for many a May.

If only I could recollect it, such  
A day of days! I let it come and go  
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;  
It seemed to mean so little, meant so much;  
If only I could now recall that touch,  
First touch of hand in hand – did one but know!

“Did one but know ... ” herhaal hy wanneer ek klaar gelees het. “Sal jy vir my nog iets doen, Betsy?”

“Enigiets.”

“Haal jou haarnaalde uit sodat jou hare los kan hang. Trek dan jou skoene uit en loop kaalvoet.”

“Hoekom?”

“Dit is hoe jy daardie ‘first day, first hour, first moment of your meeting me’ gelyk het. Juffrou Rossetti kon dalk nie onthou nie, maar ek sal dit nooit vergeet nie, want dit is die dag toe ek verlief geraak het op jou.”

“Jy jok! Ek het daardie dag aaklig gelyk.”

“Nee, jy het soos ’n engel uit ’n Da Vinci-skildery gelyk – ’n kaalvoetengel wat boonop Henry David Thoreau kon aanhaal.” Hy glimlag terwyl hy kyk hoe ek my haarnaalde uithaal. Ek skud my kop totdat my hare los om my kop hang. Dan maak ek my skoene los en skop dit saam met my sokkies uit.

“Beteken dit ek kan bly?” vra ek toe ek klaar is. “En dat jy my nie sal verlaat en weer sal weggaan nie?”

“Ek sal instem om by jou te bly, op een voorwaarde.”

“Ek weet, ek mag nie heelyd oor jou ‘kloek’ nie. Ek word ook nie toegelaat om elke twee minute te vra hoe jy voel nie.”

“O ja, dis reg. Nie ‘kloek’ nie. Ek sal dit dan moet verander na twee voorwaardes. Nie ‘kloek’ nie is een, en die tweede is dat jy met my sal trou.” Ek staar stomverbaas na hom. “Jy sien,” gaan hy voort, “ek sal binnekort voor st. Petrus by die hemelpoort staan en ek wil nie hê dit moet daar vir my nodig wees om verduidelikings te gee oor hoekom ons hier so saam gebly het nie.”

Ek kan steeds nie praat nie.

“Betsy?”

“Ja,” sê ek met ’n klein stemmetjie.

“Soen my, asseblief?”

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Op die gelukkigste dag van my lewe is ek met Walter Gibson getroud. ’n

Vrederegter lei die seremonie onder by ons dam. Ek is kaalvoet met 'n krans vol wilde rose op my los krullebos. Peter is ons strooijonker en ringdraer – hy het die vorige dag vir ons elkeen 'n trouband gaan koop. Lydia is my strooimeisie met baba Matthew in haar arms in plaas van 'n ruiker, en ek wonder nou nog wie van dié twee die hardste gehuil het. Die enigste ander persoon wat die troue bywoon, is Pa. Hy staan rond in totale verbystering en wonder waarom 'n ryk, intelligente man soos Walter dan nou met iemand soos ek sal trou. Ons hou wittebrood in ons kothuis in die geselskap van hamers en sae terwyl die span bouers vinnig 'n nuwe kombuis en badkamer bou.

“Huur soveel werkers as wat jy nodig het,” sê Walter vir die voorman, “maar ek wil dit binne twee weke klaar hê. Nie een dag langer nie. Ek en my bruid het rus en vrede nodig.”

Dit neem hulle dertien dae. Peter gaan bly saam met my pa in die plaashuis. Hy stap twee of drie keer 'n dag af kothuis toe waar hy my help om Walter in en uit sy rolstoel te tel en hom aan te trek. Walter stel ook 'n inwoon-bediende, Helen, aan om vir Pa en Peter te kook en skoon te maak. Dit is vir almal 'n gelukkige einde toe Helen en Peter verlief raak en ook getroud is.

Ek en Walter vorm 'n sielsgelukkige eenheid wat min getroude pare ooit beleef, selfs nadat hulle jare lank getroud is. Hy is egter 'n streng meester en maak seker dat ek elke dag tyd inruim om te skryf. Wanneer ek daarmee klaar is, lees ons vir mekaar en gesels en lag en wees sommer net lief vir mekaar. Die skrynwerkers bou ook by die voorstoep 'n oprit vir Walter se rolstoel en ons bring soveel tyd buite deur as wat die weer toelaat. Ons kyk na die eende en ganse op die dam, die bokke wat tot op die rand van die bos kom, hoe die seisoene in die boord verander en na die sterre in die naghemel.

Een somersaand terwyl ons in die bed lê en luister na die paddas en krieke wat onder by die dam vir mekaar sing, vra Walter skielik: “Het ek jou al ooit van my eerste nag in hierdie kothuis vertel?”

“Nee, ek dink nie so nie,” sê ek en skuif nader aan hom.

“Ek het nie geslaap nie. Nie 'n oog toegemaak nie. Die geraas daar onder by die dam! Ek het nog nooit so iets gehoor nie. Ek het 'n linnesakdoek in stukke geskeur en die klein stukkies in my ore probeer druk, maar ek kon steeds daardie vervlakste geraas hoor. Toe die paddas uiteindelik besluit om genadig te wees en ophou, het julle besete haan wakker geword en begin kraai. As ek net 'n haelgeweer gehad het! Wel, ek het besluit om terug te gaan huis toe. Ek kon nie nog 'n aand met daardie verfoeilike geraas uitstaan nie. Henry David Thoreau het beslis nooit die hele nag wakker gelê terwyl hy by

Walden Pond was nie.”

“Wat het jou van plan laat verander?” vra ek terwyl ek saam met hom lag.

“Jy het.”

“Ek?”

“Jy het vir my ontbyt gebring, en jy moes seker self ’n groot deel van die nag wakker gewees het, want jy het reeds die boek gelees wat ek vir jou geleen het en jy was gereed om dit so entoesiasies te bespreek asof jy dit self geskryf het. Jy het so pragtig en vars en vol lewe gelyk, soos ’n soet en sappige perske wat pas gepluk is. Ek het besluit ek gee nie om as die plaaslike fauna my dan die hele nag wakker hou nie, ek sou nogtans bly.”

“Jy hoor seker nou nie eens meer die paddas nie, of hoe?”

Walter lag. “Ek wag totdat jy slaap voordat ek watte in my ore druk.”

“Weet jy wat, Walter?” sê ek met trane in my oë. “Niemand in die hele wêreld het al ooit vir my gesê ek is mooi nie.”

Hy draai sy kop na my toe en soen my hare. “Dan is die hele wêreld seker so blind soos ’n mol.”

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Ons ontdek Peter is ’n behendige skrynwerker en aangesien hy nie juis iets het om hom mee besig te hou nie, begin hy boekrakke teen ons kothuis se mure opsit. Die oomblik wanneer hy klaar is met ’n rak, pak ek dit vol boeke. Dan stuur Walter ’n brief na Chicago en vra sy bediendes daar om nog ’n deel van sy versameling aan te stuur. Op ’n dag pak ek ’n vodde stel leergebinde joernale uit. Walter het sy naam op die titelblad laat druk en die joernale is van voor tot agter in sy netjiese handskrif vol geskryf. Ek maak die eerste joernaal by die eerste inskrywing oop:

Dinsdag 23 Junie 1884 – Aan boord van die S.S. Hibernia:

Ek is ’n gebore seeman! Alles daaromtrent, van die sout in die lug tot die skril geskal van die seevoëls, laat my meer vol lewe en besield voel as nog ooit tevore in my lewe. Ek wou inspring en die manne help om die toue op te trek en die ankers op te kry terwyl die sleepbote ons gister uit New Jersey se hawe gesleep het, maar die kaptein weet my pa is ’n groot aandeelhouer in hierdie groep stoomskepe en hy was onverskrokke. Ek het aangevoer dat ek by Yale die kaptein van die roeispans was en twee jaar ná mekaar die kampioenskap vir die Bulldogs gewen het (en daardie veragtelike Harvard-seuns as verloorders huis toe gestuur het), maar hy het net daarop aangedring dat hy my nie sal toelaat om enigiets te doen wat my lewe of sy werk in gevaar sal stel nie. Ek waarsku hom toe dat ek moontlik eendag die maatskappy in my pa se plek sal bestuur en neem my voor om hom te demoveer tot kajuitjonge, maar hy hou voet by stuk ...

## Ek lag hardop en blaai na die volgende inskrywing:

Vrydag 26 Junie 1884 – aan boord van die S.S. (Satan se skip) Hibernia:

Ek haat die see! Alles daaromtrent, van die onophoudelike gewieg tot die barbaarse geskud wat my naarder en sieker laat voel as wat ek nog ooit in my hele lewe gevoel het. Toe die sleepbote ons vier dae gelede uit die veiligheid van die hawe in New Jersey gesleep het, het ek glad nie geweet hulle stuur ons weg na ses meter hoë golwe en stormsterkte wind en 'n watergraf op die bodem van die see nie. Ek voel lus om myself oorboord te gooi en so vinnig 'n einde te bring aan my ellende, maar die kaptein wil my steeds nie toelaat om enigiets te doen wat my lewe of sy werk in gevaar stel nie. Hy het vir my 'n emmer gegee, gedreig om my in 'n stoorkamer toe te sluit as ek nie van die dek af bly nie. Hy het my ook verseker dat ek oor twee weke die hawe van Southampton, Engeland, sal sien. As ek leef om Southampton te sien, weet die hemel alleen dat ek sekerlik daar sal sterf, want ek sal nooit weer my voete op 'n skip sit nie ...

“Hoe het jy toe weer teruggekom?” vra ek vir Walter toe ek uiteindelik kan ophou lag.

“Gee hier, laat ek sien,” sê hy van waar hy aan die ander kant van die vertrek sit. Ek gee vir hom die joernaal en gaan sit by sy voete terwyl hy daardeur blaai. “Ja, hierdie is my eerste joernaal. Teen die tyd dat ek 'n ontspoorde trein in Europa en 'n versteurde kameel in Egipte oorleef het, het die see sommer mak gelyk.”

“Ek het nie geweet jy kan skryf nie.”

“Ek sou so hoop. Ek het darem aan Yale gegradueer, jy weet.”

“Nee, ek het dit ook nie geweet nie. Jy was ook kaptein van die roeispan. Wat is daar nog omtrent jouself wat jy my nie vertel het nie?”

“Die waarheid is in al hierdie joernale. Dit is die onverbloemde rekord van die drie jaar waartydens ek van die grootmenslewe se verantwoordelikhede gevlug het.”

“Dit klink opwindend,” sê ek toe ek die joernaal by hom vat en daardeur blaai. “Vertel dit hoe jy nuwe wêreld ontdek, barbaarse stamme getem en 'n paar prinsesse van seerowers gered het?”

“Nie wat ek kan onthou nie, maar jou weergawe klink na 'n uitstekende avontuurverhaal. Jy moet dit eendag skryf, Betsy. Nee, hierdie joernale vertel meestal hoe 'n verskeidenheid barbaarse insekte my gebyt het, van die groot hoeveelheid baie slegte kos wat ek geëet het en hoe ek met elke denkbare vervoermethode gereis het, van 'n riksja tot op 'n jak se rug.”

“Kom ons lees jou joernale saam,” sê ek en maak my gemaklik teen sy bene.

“Wat? Sodat jy kan ontdek wat 'n lafaard ek regtig is? Nooit!”

Ek dink aan die onwrikbare dapperheid wat Walter elke dag uitleef in die aangesig van 'n stadige, seker dood en my oë skiet vol tranes. Ek draai weg

sodat hy dit nie moet sien nie. “Jy is die dapperste man wat ek nog ooit ontmoet het, Walter. Ons gaan hierdie joernale van voor tot agter deurlees. Jy gaan my saam met jou na al daardie plekke toe vat, want dit is die enigste manier waarop ek ooit daar sal uitkom.”

Walter is ’n begaafde storieverteller. Terwyl die somer oorgaan na herfs sluit ek by hom aan op sy eksotiese avonture in die oerwoude van Afrika, die reënwoude in Brasilië, die piramides in Egipte en die goudvelde in Alaska. Sy joernaalinskrywings bring meer herinneringe by hom op en ek skryf dit vinnig in my eie snelskrif neer terwyl hy die herinneringe ophaal. Toe hy sy versameling *National Geographic*-tydskrifte laat kom, sien ek foto’s van baie van die plekke wat hy beskryf het. Ek het jare gelede daarvan gedroom om soos Nellie Bly deur die wêreld te reis – nou reis ek in ons klein kothuis langs die dam deur die hele wêreld saam met Walter.

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Sedert ons troue het ek vir Walter gevoer en hom geskeer, maar ek sal nooit daardie koue dag in Oktober vergeet toe ek besef het hy kan nie langer sy arms beweeg nie. Ek het pas vir hom een van die hoofstukke voorgelees wat ek geskryf het, en toe hy vir my sê dit is voortreflik hardloop ek na hom in sy rolstoel en druk hom van vreugde. Hy kon my nie ’n drukkie gee nie.

“Ek is jammer, Betsy,” fluister hy.

“Dis oukei. Ek weet jy het my lief. Ek weet ook jy sou my uitasem druk as jy kon.”

Sy omhelsings was altyd swak, maar dit was nogtans ’n verlies. Ek sou sy liefkosings en die hitte van sy arms om my mis – in die jare wat kom, sou ek hom heeltemal mis. Ek het egter reeds besluit dat ek nooit sal huil terwyl Walter leef nie. Daar sal binnekort genoeg tyd wees vir trane.

Ek koop vir Walter ’n musiekstander sodat hy die boeke wat hy wil lees daarop kan sit en hy leer omblaai deur ’n stok met ’n stukkie rubber aan in sy mond te sit. Ek sal enige tyd my skryfwerk prysgee sodat ek elke enkele oomblik saam met hom kan deurbring, maar Walter weier dat ek daarmee ophou.

Namate die maande verbygaan, raak hy ontevrede met die boeke op ons rakke – beide oud en nuut – en hy vra vir ’n Bybel. Hy vind soveel vertroosting in die lees daarvan dat ek en hy dit saam begin lees en bespreek, net soos met soveel ander boeke. Ek is egter kwaad vir God oor wat Hy aan Walter doen en ek vind geen vertroosting in wat ek lees nie. Dit verg my man

se geduldige verduidelikings, sy stille en standvastige geloof om my te help sien wat net hy op daardie heilige bladsye sien.

“Luister hierna, Walter. ‘As julle glo, sal julle alles ontvang wat julle in die gebed vra.’ Dit beteken as ons bid en glo dat jy gesond sal word – ”

“Nee, Betsy. God is nie ’n djin in ’n towerlamp tot wie jy bid en dan word al jou wense waar nie. Jesus leer ons om te bid: ‘Laat u wil ook op die aarde geskied, net soos in die hemel.’ Dit is omdat die engele in die hemel God se wil doen sonder om dit te bevraagteken. Dit is vir hulle ’n vreugde om sy wil te doen, en ons moet ook so leef.”

“En as ek nie van sy wil hou nie? As ek nie daarmee saamstem nie?”

“Wel, God gee vir ons ’n vrye wil. Ons hoef Hom nie te dien nie.” Hy laat sak sy kop teen die stoel se rugleuning en sug. “Jy weet, ek het my lewe lank so gevoel oor die feit dat ek vir my pa moes werk. Sy wil moet geskied, of ek nou daarmee saamstem of nie. Ek moes doen wat hy sê sonder om vrae te vra. Ons hemelse Vader dwing ons nooit om Hom te dien nie ... Maar weet jy wat? God weet regtig wat die beste vir ons is. Hy het ons geskep. Sy volmaakte wil is volmaak vir ons, of ons dit nou met ons beperkte verstand kan verstaan of nie. Tog laat Hy elkeen van ons toe om self te besluit: Sal ons ons eie wil of dalk die samelewing se wil kies – en dan tevrede moet wees met minder as volmaaktheid? Of sal ons God toelaat om ons te vat na die plek wat Hy vir ons gekies het – en verwonderd staan?”

Ek staan agter Walter se stoel en rus my kop op syne. “Ek hou nie van waarheen Hy jou vat nie.”

“Weet jy waarom ons voortdurend teen die idee van die dood stry, Betsy? Ek het dit nou die dag in Genesis gelees. Dit is omdat God ons geskep het om vir ewig saam met Hom in Eden te bly. Dood was nie God se keuse nie; dit was die mens s’n. Dood is onnatuurlik, ’n straf vir die sonde. God het egter die mens se keuse met ’n ander volmaakte plan kom weerlê – Hy verlos ons in Christus sodat ons vir ewig saam met Hom kan leef.”

Ek gaan om na die voorkant van sy stoel en hou Walter se kosbare gesig tussen my hande. “En intussen? Hier op die aarde?”

“Ons moet bid: ‘Laat u wil ook op die aarde geskied, net soos in die hemel.’ Belowe my dat jy altyd sal aanhou skryf, Betsy. Moenie dat jou pa of enigiemand anders hulle wil op jou afdwing nie. Moet ook nooit tevrede wees met enige ander lewe as dié een waarvoor God jou geskep het nie.”

“Wat van sy wil vir jou?” fluister ek. Ek kan nie harder praat sonder om te begin huil nie.

“Dit bly dieselfde,” sê hy. “Ons sal bid dat God se wil geskied, maak nie saak of dit beteken ek lewe of sterf nie. Ons sal ook bid dat Hy vir ons die



genade sal gee om dit te aanvaar.”

Ek soen sy voorkop, sy wenkbroue, die kneukels van sy hande. “Waarom moes God ons lewe so broos en kortstondig maak?”

Walter dink vir ’n oomblik na voordat hy antwoord. “Want die lewe is vir Hom baie kosbaar. Hy koester elke lewe wat Hy geskep het en Hy wil hê ons moet dit ook koester, soos fyn porselein. God weet hoe dit voel om in ’n brose menslike liggaam soos ons s’n te leef en te sterf. Sy Seun het ’n liggaamlike dood gely, Betsy, sodat ek en jy dit kan trotseer sonder om ooit bang te wees.”

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Walter se verlamming begin onvermydelik versprei, net soos die dokters gewaarsku het. Hy verloor gewig namate dit vir hom al hoe moeiliker word om te sluk. Dit verg enorme inspanning vir hom om te praat en sy woorde is later so onduidelik dat ek die enigste mens is wat hom nog kan verstaan.

“Ek wil ’n brief na Chicago stuur om my pa se prokureur te laat kom,” sê hy een donker winteroggend vir my. “Reël dan sommer ook dat ’n plaaslike prokureur ons dieselfde tyd kom sien. Weet jy van enige goeie prokureurs in die omgewing?”

“John Wakefield is hier in Deer Springs. Hy het sy pa se praktyk ongeveer tien jaar gelede oorgeneem.”

“Goed. Vra hom om te kom.”

Ek weet Walter wil sy testament gereed kry, maar ek kan myself nie sover kry om die woord hardop te sê toe ek die twee prokureurs kontak nie. Hulle gesels alleen saam met Walter in ons slaapkamer en dit is een van die min tye wat ek hom alleen laat. Hulle praat vir ongeveer drie ure en dan kom John Wakefield uit om my en Peter te roep om in te kom en getuies van die ondertekening te wees. Walter kan natuurlik nie langer skryf nie. Ek sluk die bitter trane weg terwyl my man wat eens vol lewe was nou ’n pen tussen sy tande vashou sodat hy ’n X op die lyntjie kan maak.

“Dankie, Betsy, dat jy my nie gelos het om alleen te sterf nie,” sê Walter toe ek hom daardie aand styf vashou. “Dankie dat jy daarop aangedring het om jou sin te kry. Ek weet nie hoe dit gebeur het dat ek jou liefde kon verdien nie, maar ek voel jammer vir enige man wat alleen moet sterf.”

Nadat die prokureurs daar was, dring Walter nie langer daarop aan dat ek aan my roman werk nie. Dit bly in die skryftafel in ons slaapkamer se laai waar ek dit gebêre het sodat ek elke enkele oomblik saam met hom kan deurbring. Terwyl die sneeu een middag buite ons kothuis se vensters ophoop,

vra hy my om vir hom die tonele uit die Evangelies te lees wat vertel van Christus se dood en opstanding. Toe ek by die gedeelte kom waar Jesus die twee mans op pad na Emmaus ontmoet het, onderbreek Walter my.

“Weet jy waarom hulle Hom nie herken het nie?” vra hy.

“Nee, waarom?”

“Want Jesus se liggaam is nie ‘lewend’ gemaak soos Lasarus s’n nie. Hy is uit die dood opgewek. Hulle het Hom nie herken nie, want sy opgewekte liggaam het anders gelyk as sy fisieke liggaam, amper soos ’n appel van ’n appelpit verskil. Hy was anders. Dit is wat Paulus bedoel wanneer hy in Korintiërs oor die opwekking van die dooies skryf. Die liggaam wat in swakheid gesaai word, sal in krag opgewek word; dit word as ’n natuurlike liggaam gesaai, maar opgewek as ’n geestelike liggaam.”

Walter moes as gevolg van my gebrek aan ’n reaksie, my versuim om selfs met hom oor die Skrif te redeneer, kon agterkom dat my geloof en my hoop net so verlam is soos sy ledemate. Ek kon sien hoe hy worstel, met die bietjie krag wat hy nog het, om ’n manier te vind om my te help verstaan.

“Kyk na die bome daarbuite, Betsy. As jy nog nooit voorheen die lente beleef het nie, sou jy hoop verloor het. Jy sou elke liewe een afgekap het omdat jy glo die bome is dood. Maar die lente sal weer kom. Die bome sal bot en vrugte dra. Ek is in die winter van my lewe en jy kyk na my sterwende liggaam en sien dit soos daardie bome; sonder hoop. In Christus sal nuwe lewe egter kom. Jesus het gesê: ‘Elkeen wat lewe en in My glo, sal in alle ewigheid nooit sterwe nie.’ Hierdie is nie die einde nie. Ek en jy sal in die ewigheid saam leef.”

“Dit sal nie maak dat ek jou nie mis nie,” sê ek en stry teen my trane.

“Ek weet. Toe ek jou verlede somer agtergelaat het en terug is Chicago toe, kon ek jou nie sien nie, maar jy was lewend in my hart, want ek kon in my gedagtes sien hoe jy vir jou ’n nuwe tuiste skep; hoe jy trou en voortgaan met jou lewe. Al kon jy my nie sien nie, het jy jou weer ingedink hoe ek in Chicago leef, elke dag werk toe gaan, elke aand met my perdekar huis toe ry. Dit sal dieselfde wees wanneer ek jou hierdie keer verlaat. Jy kan my lewend hou in jou hart, want ek leef steeds in die ewigheid. Ek maak eenvoudig vir my woning op ’n ander plek.”

Ek verloor die stryd teen my trane. Ek gaan lê langs hom op die bed en druk my gesig styf teen syne. “Ek sal nooit ophou om jou lief te hê nie,” huil ek. “Nooit nie!”

“Ek sal jou ook in alle ewigheid liefhê. Kyk na die bome, Betsy. Wanneer jy die bloeies sien, sal jy weet ek is by Christus ... en dat ek vir ewig leef. Die dag sal kom wanneer hierdie droë, dooie ledemate van my met die

opstandingslewe sal bot.”

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’n Paar kort weke later weet ek die einde is naby. Walter se asemhaling is pynlik en verg groot inspanning. Dit laat my eie bors pyn wanneer ek hoor hoe hy worstel, maar hy kla nooit nie. Ek hou hom vas en gesels met hom, lees vir hom, sing vir hom, terwyl ek my eie paniekerigheid onderdruk, want ek wil nie hê hy moet die angs van stadige en uitgerekte versmoring beleef nie.

Die aand voor sy dood span hy hom in om een laaste keer met my te praat.

“Gaan elke lente na die boord toe, Betsy ... Kyk na die bloeisels ... Dit is God se belofte dat ons mekaar weer sal sien.”

Ek hou vir Walter in my arms toe hy sy laaste asem uitblaas. Hy hou dit vir ’n oomblik op en asem dan net uit, soos ’n sakte sug van verligting. Toe is hy weg.

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Die volgende oggend laat kom ek vir John Wakefield. Hy sê vir my Walter het met ’n plaaslike begrafnisondernemer gereël om sy liggaam vir sy familie te stuur. Hulle begrawe hom in Chicago. Ek het nie die begrafnis bygewoon nie. Ek kon nie kyk hoe hulle Walter in daardie kis sit en dit in die koue grond laat sak nie.

Ek sou graag wou sê dat ek Walter se dood goed hanteer het; dat ek voorbereid was daarop en nie gerou het soos dié met geen hoop nie. Tog is dit nie waar nie. Ek versink tot in ’n donker plek waar geen lig kan bykom nie. Dit is winter buite my venster en ook winter diep in my siel. Toe my trane opraak, rou ek daarsonder.

Lydia hou my vas en probeer my met haar liefde troos, maar dit voel of sy buite my stukkende kothuis staan en tevergeefs deur die vensters na binne kyk. Ek kan nie die deur vir haar of enigiemand anders oopmaak nie.

En toe blom die kersiebome een warm lenteoggend, net soos Walter gesê het dit sou. Die een dag is die boord nog dood en leweloos, die volgende dag kyk ek by my venster uit en kan die uitsig nie herken nie. Die bome se skoonheid roep my, fluister vir my, totdat ek myself buite bevind waar ek onder die trosse geurige pienk blomme staan. Op daardie oomblik besef ek twee waarhede met volkome sekerheid. Walter leef. En God is hier, by my.

Ek ontmoet God daardie oggend in die boord – nie in ’n tasbare vorm wat jy kan sien of hoor nie, maar ek voel hoe sy teenwoordigheid my vertroos, net soos ek die vertroosting van Walter se teenwoordigheid kon voel wanneer ons in een vertrek was, selfs met my rug na hom gekeer. Dit voel of God vir my sê: “Wanneer alles weg is, is Ek steeds hier.”

Toe weet ek dat ek God se wil wil doen – op aarde soos in die hemel – want ek sal nooit die vrede vind wat Walter gevind het tensy ek dit doen nie. Ek wil my lewe leef volgens God se plan, nie ander mense s’n nie – om die mens te word wat Hy my geskep het om te wees. Daardie oggend verander God my naam. Mense dink ’n vrou wat nie getroud is nie, wat by haar pa bly en boeke skryf en wat deur die boord dwaal terwyl sy met haarself praat, moet seker mal wees. Sy het sekerlik ’n paar varkies verloor. Tog sou ek die vrou wees wat God wil ek moet wees. Daarom verander Hy toe my naam na Batty.

Die eerste ding wat ek daardie oggend doen nadat ek uiteindelik terug is kothuis toe, is om die skryftafel se laai oop te trek en my afgeskepte manuskrip uit te haal. Toe ek die laai ooptrek, is dit nie meer daar nie. In plaas daarvan kry ek ’n briefie:

*Liewe mevrou Gibson*

*Ek het nie die boek by jou gesteel nie. Meester Walter het gesê het moet die brief skryf en verduidelik dat hy dit vir ’n uitgewer gestuur het. Hy het gesê ek moet skryf die boek is gereed, maar hy weet jy sou dit nooit self gestuur het nie toe vra hy sy prokureur om dit te doen.*

*Peter*

*Ns. Hy het gesê ek moet bysit ek is lief vir jou (hy, nie ek nie) en om te sê jy moet nog ’n boek begin skryf.*

Omtrent ’n maand later daag John Wakefield by ons huis op. Nadat Peter en sy vrou terug is Chicago toe het ek die kothuis gesluit en weer by my pa in die plaashuis gaan bly.

“Goeiemiddag, mevrou Gibson,” sê John en lig sy hoed. “Hoe gaan dit vandag?”

“Dit gaan goed, John. Wat het jy alles daar agter op jou wa? Jy gaan tog nie weg uit Deer Springs nie, of hoe?”

“Nee,” lag hy. “Dit is jou meubels, nie myne nie. Waar kan ek dit vir jou aflaai?”

“Myne? Wat is dit? Waar kom dit vandaan?” Ek loop na die wa toe en lig die seil om onder in te loer. Meneer Wakefield volg my.

“Volgens jou oorlede man se testament gee hy vir jou die lessenaar en stoel wat hy gebruik het toe hy nog vir sy pa gewerk het. Hy het my ook gevra om vir jou ’n tikmasjien te koop.”

Die lessenaar is van kersiehout met brons handvatsels aan die laai en 'n gepoleerde blad wat soos 'n spieël in die son blink. “Dit is massief,” sê ek.

“Ja, dit is 'n pragstuk. Ek wens ek kon so 'n lessenaar vir my kantoor bekostig.”

Die Remington-tikmasjien lyk vreeslik ingewikkeld in vergelyking met pen en papier. “O aarde, John. Ek het nie die vaagste benul hoe om die ding te gebruik nie.”

Hy glimlag toe hy sy aktetas op die wa se wiel balanseer en 'n paar velle papier uithaal. “Meneer Gibson het gesê ek moet vir jou sê – en ek haal aan – ‘Leer hoe, Betsy. Jy skryf verskriklik lelik’ – einde van aanhaling.”

Ek lag én huil oor dié boodskap van Walter. Dit voel of dit van anderkant die graf kom. “Is daar enige ander opdragte van die baas?” vra ek en vee 'n traan uit my oog.

“Ja, hy het my aangestel as jou prokureur.” Meneer Wakefield probeer die aktetas balanseer terwyl hy deur die papiere soek na iets. Ek beduie hom na 'n stoel op die voorstoep sodat sy papiere nie in al vier windrigtings sal wegwaai nie.

“Meneer Gibson het gevra ek moet jou belange beskerm,” gaan hy voort, “veral wanneer jy skryfkontrakte begin ontvang. Ek moet al jou kontrakte deeglik bestudeer voordat jy enige daarvan onderteken.”

“Jy bedoel ás ek een ontvang.”

“Nee, meneer Gibson was doodseker dat dit sal gebeur. Dit is waarom hy my vooruit betaal het.” Hy grawe in die aktetas wat nou by sy voete staan en gee dan vir my 'n dik, toe lêer aan. “Jy moet dit op 'n veilige plek bêre, mevrou Gibson. Dit is die titelakte vir jou huis.”

“My huis?”

“Ja, die klein kliphuisie by die dam. Meneer Gibson het dit tesame met twee akker grond by jou pa gekoop. Hy wou die dam ook koop, maar dit behoort aan Frank Wyatt en hy het geweier, ten spyte van die baie vrygewige aanbod wat meneer Gibson hom gemaak het.” Meneer Wakefield grawe weer in die aktetas en haal nog 'n stapel papiere uit. Hy gee dit ook vir my.

“Wat is dit alles?”

“Hierdie dokumente verduidelik die detail van die trustfonds wat jou man vir jou onderhoud voorsien het. Die hoofsom word in 'n bank in Chicago gehou, maar 'n baie vrygewige maandelikse toelaag sal vanuit die rente in 'n rekening oorbetaal word wat hy hier in Deer Springs vir jou oopgemaak het. Daar is geen beperkings op die rekening nie. Jy kan soveel spandeer as wat jy wil, waarop jy ook al wil.”

Meneer Wakefield se oë word wasig toe hy sien hoe die trane oor my

wange loop. Hy buk vooroor en hou my vas terwyl hy my ongemaklik op die rug klop. “Hy was baie lief vir jou, Betsy ... en hy het seker gemaak dat jy goed versorg sal wees.”

Walter het nog ’n paar verrassings vir my. Omtrent ses maande ná sy dood kry ek een oggend ’n brief geadresseer aan Betsy Gibson in my posbus. Dit kom van ’n uitgewer in New York.

My hande bewe so hewig terwyl ek dit oopskeur dat ek myself met die briewemes raaksny. My bloed drup rooi op die brief terwyl ek dit lees:

*Geagte mevrou Gibson*

*Baie geluk. Jou manuskrip is aanvaar vir publikasie ...*

Toe ek uiteindelik lank genoeg ophou skree en dans om die res te lees, besef ek dat Walter ’n dekbriëf dikteer het wat saam met my manuskrip gestuur is. Ek kan my oë nie glo toe ek die uitgewer se woorde lees nie: *Ons hou ook van jou idee vir ’n reeks boeke vir jong meisies en bied jou ’n kontrak aan vir die skryf van nog vier romans ...*

“’n Reeks!” roep ek hardop uit. “Wat op aarde het jy gedink, Walter?”

Die reeks boeke wat ek onder my getroude naam geskryf het, is natuurlik gepubliseer en was baie gewild. Toe Pa ongeveer twee jaar later ’n beroerte gehad en daarna bedlêend was, het ek besluit om in die aande vir hom hardop uit Walter se reisjoernale voor te lees. Toe ek die eerste een oopmaak, is ek verbaas om nog ’n briefie van Walter in Peter se handskrif te kry:

*Liewe mevrou Gibson*

*Meester Walter sê jy moet onthou seuns hou ook van opwindende verhale en dat jy vir hulle iets moet skryf. Hy sê hy wou altyd ’n dapper held gewees het en dat jy hom asseblief ’n aantreklike een moet maak.*

*Peter*

*Ns. Hy sê hy is lief vir jou en jy moenie vergeet dat hy die prinses van die seerowers red nie.*

Die eerste avontuurverhaal vir seuns wat ek skryf, begin aan boord van die S.S. Hibernia waar dit tussen ses meter hoë golwe in stormsterkte wind oor die see vaar. Anders as Walter het die onverskrokke held nie ’n emmer nodig nie. My uitgewer is mal oor die boek, maar hy dink die reeks se outeur het ’n manlike naam nodig. Ek kies toe “Herman Walters” ter ere aan my gunsteling onderwyser, meneer Herman, en my ware held, my man, Walter Gibson.

Hierdie boeke is net so gewild soos die reeks vir meisies en ek leef “gelukkig vir ewig en altyd”, soos hulle sê, terwyl ek my bejaarde pa versorg en boeke skryf in my geheime skrywerstoeflug in die kothuis by die dam.

Min mense in Deer Springs het ooit geweet ek is 'n skrywer.

Ná Pa se dood bly ek steeds in die plaashuis terwyl ek in die kothuis skryf, soms tot lank na middernag. As ek navorsing moet doen vir 'n toneel in een van my avontuurverhale, trek ek soms een van Walter se ou pakke klere aan en stap dan deur die bosse al om die dam om 'n gevoel te kry van hoe dit vir my held sou voel om in die donker in die oerwoud rond te sluip. Dit is waarmee ek besig is die aand toe my pa se huis afbrand. Ek is op pad terug na die plaashuis toe ek vir Frank Wyatt by my agterdeur uit en teen die heuwel op sien hardloop. 'n Oomblik later hoor ek 'n harde *swoesj* en vlamme skiet by my plaashuis se vensters uit.

Daar was natuurlik geen telefone of enigiets nie en die huis het tot teen die grond afgebrand voordat die vrywillige brandslaners iets daaromtrent kon doen. Ek het geweet waarom Frank dit gedoen het. My pa het die huis en sy laaste stukkie grond vir my gegee, maar as ek sonder 'n erfgenaam sou sterf, sal dit deel van Wyatt-boorde word. Teen daardie tyd was Lydia reeds dood; daarom het Frank die huis afgebrand met die hoop dat ek ook sou sterf. Frank het hom egter byna doodgeskrik toe ek tussen die bosse uit kom steeds met Walter se pak klere aan. Ek het langs hom gaan staan terwyl die brandweermanne die smeulende puin natgespuit het.

“Betty! Jy ... jy leef nog.”

“Jy is lekker verbaas, nè, Frank?”

“Ek ... jy ... ek het gedink ...”

“Ek is seker hulle sal nooit eens vermoed dat dit jy was wat die brand gestig het nie.”

Ek kon selfs in die donkerte sien hoe bleek hy word.

“W ... Waarvan praat jy?”

“Ek het jou dit sien doen, Frank. Jy het gehoop dat ek sou doodbrand, nè?”

“Bedoel jy dat ek jou wou doodmaak? Jy is so mal soos 'n haas.”

“Nou goed. Jy kan vir die hele wêreld vertel ek is jou waansinnige oujongnooi-skoonsuster, as dit jou gelukkig maak. Jy kan die laaste deel van my pa se grond ook kry. Die kothuis en die twee akker grond waarop dit is, behoort egter aan my. Jy sal dit nooit besit nie, Frank. Nooit nie. Die titelakte is in my naam.”

Ná daardie nag het Frank Wyatt nooit weer 'n enkele woord met my gepraat nie.

# Wyatt Orchards

*Summer 1931*

“The day is thine, the night also is thine:

thou has prepared the light and the sun.

Thou has set all the borders of the earth:

thou has made summer and winter.”

PSALM 74:6–17



## CHAPTER TWELVE

**W**hen Aunt Batty finished her story, I stared at her in wonderment. “*You’re* Betsy Gibson? *You* wrote all those books I loved so much when I was a girl?” Gabe and I had coaxed her inside the farmhouse to tell her tale around the kitchen table over a pot of coffee.

“Yes, that’s my real married name,” Aunt Batty said. She always wore a thin gold chain around her neck, and now she pulled it out from inside her nightgown. A gold wedding band dangled from the end of it. “I like to wear Walter’s ring close to my heart,” she said.

“And you’re Herman Walters, too?” Gabe said. He seemed even more flabbergasted than I was.

“Yes...I hope you’re not too disappointed to discover that Herman Walters is a woman?”

“Not at all! I’m just amazed to finally meet him...or her...I mean, *you!*” He sprang up from his chair and bent over tiny little Aunt Batty, hugging her like a long-lost relative. “Your stories saved my life when I was a boy,” he said, his voice husky with emotion. “I really mean that! They were the only escape I had sometimes— from...everything.”

“I’m glad I could help,” she said, patting his back.

I suddenly had an idea how Aunt Batty might save my kids and me, too, but I was scared to death to ask. What if she took offense and stormed out of the house and abandoned us? But if I didn’t ask, we might not have a house at all in another two days.

“Aunt Batty, what ever became of the trust fund Walter left you?” I finally got up the nerve to ask. “Did it survive the stock market crash?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Walter left me more money than I ever needed. Especially once my books started selling like hot cakes.”

“Might some of it still be in Mr. Preston’s bank?” I asked.

“Not on your life! I never trusted my money in that mule headed man’s bank—or anyone else’s bank! The trust fund deposited it there every month and I withdrew it every month.”

“That turned out to be a wise decision,” Gabe said, “considering how many banks have failed this past year.”

I pictured my kids and me living like hobos, and summoned all my courage to ask, “Aunt Batty, if you still have any of that money left...could I borrow five hundred dollars? I’ll pay you back just as soon as we harvest this year’s crops.”

“Sure, Toots! Take all you want. What on earth do I need it for? How soon do you need it?”

“Right away. Today. Now.”

She stood up, pulling her coat off the back of her chair, and slipped her arms into it. “Okay, let’s go.”

Gabe looked at me in surprise. “Shouldn’t you let her get dressed, Eliza?”

I still wore my nightclothes, too, but I hadn’t removed my coat. “No, please, I’m afraid if we don’t go now...” I didn’t want to say that sometimes Aunt Batty’s memory failed her and that if we didn’t go while her memories were fresh, I was afraid she would forget where she kept her money.

Gabe frowned as I handed Aunt Batty her shoes. He was still scowling as he followed us two nightgown-clad ladies down the hill to the cottage. I was excited, yet afraid to get my hopes up. The money might be in gold doubloons or even Confederate money for all Aunt Batty cared.

Everything in her cottage was still topsy-turvy, but I was relieved to see that her parlor and her enormous desk were miraculously

undamaged over the winter. We had removed all the books from the lowest shelves and they were still packed away, but Aunt Batty started scanning the remaining books, perusing the titles.

“Look for stories about greed,” she said. “That’s where I keep the larger bills.”

“Here’s *Silas Marner*,” Gabe said, pulling it from the top shelf. He handed it to her. “Will this do?”

“Yes, that’s an excellent choice, Gabe.”

She held the book upside down by its spine and ruffled the pages until the money that she’d hidden there fluttered to the floor. It was genuine! Aunt Batty scooped up three twenties, two fifties and a one-hundred dollar bill. My heart pounded with excitement as I turned back to the bookshelves. I’d never heard of half the books but I stopped when I found Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. “How about the Ebenezer Scrooge story?” I asked.

“Even better. Open it up and see, Eliza.”

I turned it upside down and rifled through the pages as she had done.

“Merry Christmas! And God bless us, every one!” Aunt Batty cheered as three one-hundred dollar bills floated out. We had found more money than I needed in only two books!

“Well, would you look at that?” Aunt Batty said suddenly. Gabe had pulled *Treasure Island* off the shelf and a letter had fallen out of it.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“Remember that last letter from Matthew you asked me about? Here it is! I hid it in one of his favorite books.”

The envelope she handed to me was limp and as thin as tissue paper. Matthew had written it on stationery from a hotel in France:

*April 14, 1918*

*Dear Aunt Betty,*

*Thank you for writing and telling me the news about my mother. I've seen so much death over here that I suppose I should be used to it by now, but I'm not. I loved her. And she never stopped loving you and me, did she? Please take care of Sam for her sake, okay? And for my sake, too. Don't let his father destroy him like he destroyed everyone else.*

*Love now and always,*

*Matthew*

But finding the letter wouldn't help me unravel the mystery of whether or not Gabe was Matthew Wyatt. Except for the signature, the letter was typed. I slid it back into the envelope and tucked it inside *Treasure Island* again.

"Here's your money, Toots," Aunt Batty said, pushing the bills into my hands. For a moment I was too overwhelmed to speak. I had enough for the mortgage! More than enough.

"I...I'll pay you back. I promise...."

She waved me away. "Oh, I don't want it back."

"No, I can't take this unless you make it a loan. I intend to pay you back just as soon as I sell our fruit."

She walked away from Gabe and me and stood gazing through the front window as if deep in thought. "Tell you what, Toots," she finally said, facing us again. "I've always wanted to own Walter's Pond. Will you sell it to me for five hundred dollars?"

"Gladly," I said, wiping tears of relief. "You have a deal."

That's when I took a good look around for the first time and noticed that Gabe had finished the kitchen roof and cleaned up the mess. The wainscoting could have used a coat of paint, and Gabe's carpentry would never win first prize at the county fair, but Aunt Batty could use her kitchen again.

"How long ago did you finish here?" I asked Gabe.

He shrugged. "Month or so ago."

I stared at Aunt Batty in wonder. "Yet you didn't leave me? You

stayed with me?" That seemed like an even bigger miracle to me than finding the money.

"You needed me, Toots," she said. "You and those wonderful kids of yours. How could I leave all of you?"

"But...but you've worked so hard for me all this time...and you didn't have to."

She pulled me into her arms. "It isn't work when you love someone."

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On the day that the mortgage was due, I walked into Mr. Preston's bank and handed him the \$528.79 Frank Wyatt owed him. Mr. Preston looked shocked. And a little disappointed.

"Well, Mrs. Wyatt, how about that? Frank Wyatt must have kept a few extra bills stuffed under his mattress, eh?"

I remembered finding the money amongst the pages of Ebenezer Scrooge's story and smiled. "That's really none of your business, Mr. Preston."

I drove home feeling happier than I had in a long time. But trouble was determined to hound me. Wouldn't you know that as soon as I overcame one crisis, the next one would rear its ugly head? This time the weather turned against me. Gabe had loaded Aunt Batty's radio onto the pickup truck and driven it up to my house for all of us to enjoy. That's how we heard the announcement—the weather bureau had issued a frost warning for our area that night.

"Uh-oh, that's bad news," Aunt Batty said, shaking her head. "A frost could kill the blossoms. And no blossoms means no fruit."

"Smudge pots!" I said, remembering. "My father-in-law used to set up smudge pots in the cherry and pear orchards if there was going to be a frost. He'd fill them full of oil, float a corn cob in each one for a wick, and let them burn all night."

Gabe was already on his feet. “I guess we’d better get started before the temperature drops.”

All six of us bundled up and set to work. Becky and Aunt Batty gathered up corn cobs while the rest of us hauled hundreds of pots out of the attic of the apple barn and loaded them onto the back of the truck. But when we went to fill them from the big fuel oil tank we discovered that it was nearly empty. There was no place to buy more oil this time of night, either. I was so upset I couldn’t think straight.

“Listen, it’ll be all right,” Gabe soothed. “We don’t have to light them yet, and we don’t have to fill them to the top. We’ll just put a little oil in each one and I’ll stay up and refill them when they start to burn out.”

I remembered the story in the Bible about the widow and her kids who were in as big of a fix as I was in. God told her to have faith and just keep filling all the jars she had with oil, and the jug didn’t run out until she was all finished. I guess Aunt Batty’s prayers must have helped us that night because that’s exactly what happened with my oil barrel. Gabe kept filling smudge pots about half full, and even though I kept expecting the big drum to run dry any minute, it never did. We set out all the pots near the most vulnerable trees, then I sent Aunt Batty and the kids to bed. Gabe and I each had an extra gallon container full of oil and after lighting the pots sometime after midnight, we stayed up all night refilling them.

The hardest part was staying awake. By five o’clock in the morning I felt tuckered out. I topped off all the pots that needed it, then climbed into the pickup truck to rest for a minute and warm myself up. I had just leaned my head back and closed my eyes when Gabe opened the passenger door.

“May I join you?” he asked, rubbing his hands together to warm them.

“Sure, climb in.” I started the engine and let the heater warm us

both up. “You’d better talk to me,” I said, closing my eyes again, “or I’m going to fall sound asleep.”

“Why don’t you go home and go to bed, Eliza? I can finish by myself. It’s nearly dawn.”

“No,” I yawned. “We’re really scraping the bottom of the barrel now, and it’ll be a regular juggling act for you to keep all those fires burning by yourself.”

Gabe chuckled. “There were times tonight when I felt like one of those guys in the circus who has to balance a dozen plates at a time and keep them all spinning.”

“While riding a unicycle,” I added, laughing with him, “and not letting any of them fall and break.”

“But we did it,” he said with a contented sigh. “We should congratulate ourselves.” He stuck out his hand, waiting for me to shake it. I hesitated, then stretched out my own hand and gave his a quick shake. Gabe’s skin was rough and calloused, his grip rockhard. We touched only briefly, but it sent a shiver through me that went all the way to my toes. I hoped he hadn’t noticed how rattled I was.

“Are you warm enough?” I asked. When Gabe nodded I shut off the engine. The sudden silence rattled me even more so I started chattering, just like Becky does. “You know, all the time my father-in-law ran this place I never realized how demanding it all was. I had my own chores to do in the house while taking care of the kids, so I never gave much thought to what went on out here in the orchard. I know it took the two of them to get everything done, though. Frank had to hire help for a while after...when it was just him.” I stopped as abruptly as I started.

“May I ask you a question?” Gabe said after a pause. He sounded so serious it scared me.

“You can ask, though I can’t promise I’ll answer.”

“You never talk much about your husband,” he said. “Your kids are

starting to talk about him and I think it's helping them grieve for him. But I've noticed that you don't. You hardly even say his name. You avoided saying it just now when you were talking."

"That isn't a question."

"I know. I guess the question is 'why not?' But that's really none of my business." He sighed. "I'm tired, so I'm wording this very poorly. What I really want to tell you is that if you ever need to talk...If you ever want to talk about Sam...I'd be very happy to listen."

"Thank you."

Gabe waited. The long silence became uncomfortable. I knew he expected me to pour out all the grief and sorrow I had stored up for so long, but I had nothing to say. He finally broke the silence first.

"I think one of the things that makes it so hard for your children is that their father is so completely gone. There aren't any pictures of him, no belongings of his lying around anywhere in the house, no sign that he ever existed except for these clothes you loaned me or maybe what they see of him in each other—like the color of his hair or his eyes."

"That was my father-in-law's doing. He did the same thing each time one of them died—he erased every trace of them. There aren't any pictures of his wife or other sons, either."

"But Frank Wyatt is dead now. You could bring Sam's memory back if you wanted to."

"I don't. I think it's better this way." I felt close to tears and I didn't know why. How could I admit to Gabe that the sadness I felt whenever I thought of Sam or mentioned his name was caused by guilt, not grief?

"Do Becky and Luke get their red hair from him?" he asked quietly.

"No. From my mother." As soon as I'd told him, I was sorry. If he started asking me about her, the dam would break for sure. Thankfully he didn't. He was still stuck on Sam.



“I can’t help wondering what your husband was like. I have a fairly clear picture of what his father was like—but not him.”

I realized that I didn’t have a clear picture of Sam either, and I’d been married to him for nine years. The truth made me angry and it loosened my tongue because I knew that the fault wasn’t mine or Sam’s—it was his father’s.

“Sam never had a chance to find out who he was,” I said in a trembling voice. “He stuffed all his dreams and all his feelings down inside himself and lived his entire life trying to be the son his father wanted him to be, trying to please him. I say ‘trying’ because you could never please Frank Wyatt. He never saw all the things you did right, only the one tiny thing you did wrong. He was like that man in the Bible who tries to take the speck of dust out of someone’s eye. I heard a preacher talk about that verse one time. I happened to be near a logging area, and I had just seen all those huge piles of logs everywhere. I could imagine that miserable man in the parable with one of those beams in his eye and I knew that it must have hurt him a lot. A speck of dust in your eye is bothersome enough.

“Then I met my father-in-law,” I continued. “He had one of those big old beams in each one of his eyes, and they blinded him. He couldn’t see Sam—he couldn’t even see his grandchildren. All he ever did was criticize, and he never showed them one ounce of love or gratitude or approval. Even worse, those beams caused Frank so much pain that he lashed out all the time, like a wounded animal. I almost envied Sam when he died and he could finally get away from his father. I’ve always hoped the Good Lord himself was waiting for him on the other side and that Sam would finally get to hear *someone* say, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant.’ ”

Gabe was very still. The engine made a ticking sound as it cooled. Then Gabe said quietly, “My father was the same type of man.” I didn’t move, didn’t say a word, afraid he wouldn’t continue if I did.

“The thing is—”

But then Gabe did stop. He shook his head, and his whole body seemed to shiver as if he couldn't bring himself to talk about the man. I understood. I couldn't talk out loud about my daddy, either. We had both reached a wall we weren't willing to climb.

“Hey, the sun's coming up,” he said suddenly. “Maybe we can finally let these fires go out.”

He climbed out of the truck and walked around to lean against the front fender on my side, facing the sunrise. I climbed out, too, and stood beside him, stretching.

“I'll run into town today and buy some more fuel oil,” I said. “Then we can fill all the smudge pots to the top and let them burn on their own tonight.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Gabe looking at me. He was biting his lip, trying not to smile.

“What's so funny?” I asked, facing him square on.

“Your face. It's covered with soot. You look like Al Jolson.”

I couldn't help smiling. “So do you. We could start our own traveling minstrel show.”

Gabe laughed as he pulled a bandana from his pocket. “Here, hold still. I'll wipe it off for you.” He held the back of my head with one hand and began dabbing my face with the handkerchief. We stood just inches apart, closer than we'd ever stood before, and my heart began thumping foolishly. All of a sudden Gabe stopped wiping. I made the mistake of looking into his eyes the same moment that he gazed into mine. His were as soft and warm as melted chocolate. His hand still held my head and he pulled me gently toward himself, finally closing his eyes as our lips met.

That kiss was like the touch of a match to fuel oil. Gabe's other arm came around me as he crushed me to himself, and what began as a gentle kiss quickly blazed with intensity. My arms encircled him,

clung to him, and I returned his kiss with a passion I'd never experienced before. The feelings that seared through me frightened me, the strength of them terrified me. I felt safe in his arms, protected, even as all the barriers I'd built to protect myself turned to ashes. I was in love with Gabe, plain and simple.

I don't know what might have become of us if it hadn't been for Winky. Aunt Batty must have let him out for his morning run, and he sneaked up on Gabe and me, sat down at our feet, and barked. The unexpected sound of it made me jump right out of Gabe's arms. Winky was just a silly, half-blind dog, and all Gabe and I had done was kiss, but I felt as though I'd been caught by my daddy, doing something I shouldn't do. I nearly tripped over one of the oil containers as I quickly backed away from Gabe. He reached out to steady me but I twisted away from his dangerous touch. Once burnt, twice shy, as Aunt Peanut used to say. I started to run.

"Eliza, wait!"

"No. Stay away from me."

"But why?"

I whirled around to face him and I began trembling from head to foot as I realized the truth. "Because I don't even know who you are."

Gabe couldn't have looked more stunned if I had whacked him with a two-by-four. I turned and hurried away before he had time to recover, but I could have sworn I heard him mumble, "Neither do I...."

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After that morning I was afraid to get near Gabe again. It wasn't that I didn't trust him; the truth was, I didn't trust myself. I avoided being alone with him, and when all else failed and I had to work beside him, I kept Winky between us as a reminder. Except for operating the spray rig, most of the jobs like running the corn planter up and down the rows, could be done by one of us alone. I made sure

we stayed apart.

Between disking and dragging and spraying, I soon memorized every square inch of the orchard. I got in the habit of using the big work horses instead of the tractor in order to save gasoline, and as time passed, I grew to enjoy their quiet company. They reminded me of the beautiful Percheron horses I'd known so well as a child.

As spring inched toward summer and the apple blossoms faded and died, a gradual change took place in me until one morning, as I stood in the middle of the orchard, I realized that these weren't Frank Wyatt's trees anymore—they were mine. Mine! I had trimmed them and fertilized them and babied them through frost and protected them from insects. I had fallen in love with my land and I didn't care whose name appeared on the deed—I could no more hand the orchard over to Matthew Wyatt without a fight than I could hand over Jimmy or Luke or Becky Jean.

My lawyer had still heard nothing about Matthew, so I didn't have to hand over the orchard just yet, but as time went on, it seemed as though I was handing over my children to Gabe Harper. It worried me to death. Gabe had won Becky's heart by making the swing, and now he spent a good deal of his spare time teaching Jimmy and Luke all sorts of things, like how to play mumblety-peg with a pocket knife. But when Jimmy came into the kitchen one afternoon waving his daddy's fishing pole, it was the last straw.

"Mama! Look what we found in the tool shed! Mr. Harper said he'll take us fishing this Saturday like Dad used to do."

I grabbed the pole from Jimmy's hand and stormed outside to find Gabe. He was cleaning out the shed and hanging all the tools on nails the way Frank Wyatt used to do. Gabe gaped in surprise when I threw the fishing pole at his feet.

"Here! Put this thing back where you found it and don't you dare take my sons fishing!"

He looked bewildered as he bent to pick it up. "Why not?"

*Because they'll fall in love with you and you'll break their hearts when you leave us,* my heart screamed, but I couldn't say the words out loud.

"Because you never should have promised to take them fishing in the first place," I said instead. "You're not their father!"

"I know I'm not!" His knuckles turned so white as he gripped the fishing rod I was sure he would snap it in half. He took a step toward me. "Jimmy was helping me clean up in here and he found the pole. He asked me if I'd ever gone fishing when I was a kid, and when I said that I had, he begged me to take him. How could I tell him no, Eliza? How?"

I didn't answer. Gabe and I stared at each other for a long moment, then he finally said, "If you don't want me to take them fishing, then I won't. But you'll have to be the one to break the news to them, because I can't do it."

My eyes filled with tears. I was so angry I was shaking. "Don't you dare hurt my kids, Gabe Harper! Life has hurt them badly enough already!"

He threw down the pole and seized my shoulders. His face was angry, his grip hard, but when he spoke his voice was soft. "If I ever hurt any of you, I promise that it won't be intentional. It'll be because...because it's out of my control." Then he released me and stalked out of the shed.

Friday night after dark, Gabe and the boys dug in the garden for night crawlers, collecting them in an old tin can. Early Saturday morning the three of them drove the truck down to the river to go fishing. Jimmy and Luke each caught a couple of fish and they were in seventh heaven. Aunt Batty cleaned them and cooked them for dinner. But I had no appetite at all.

The fishing trip was just the beginning as they spent more and more time together. The boys begged Gabe to help them practice hitting and

catching a ball so they wouldn't be the last ones to be picked for the baseball teams at school. On a lazy Sunday afternoon, Gabe and Aunt Batty set up bases under the clotheslines for a game of stickball. Luke held the bat, Gabe pitched, and Jimmy, Becky, and Aunt Batty covered the three bases. I stood at the kitchen door, watching.

"Eliza, come on out here and catch for us," Gabe called to me from the pitcher's mound. "We need you."

"I...I don't know how. I've never played baseball."

"You've never played baseball?" Gabe said, scratching his head. "What kind of a half-baked school did you go to?"

*If he only knew*, I thought.

"Come on, Mom," Jimmy begged. "We need you to be our catcher."

"No...I really can't."

In just a few swift strides Gabe crossed the backyard and took me by the arm, pulling me into the game before I could protest further. "All you have to do is stand here behind home plate and catch the ball if Luke misses it. But Luke isn't going to miss it, are you, buddy? Just keep your eye on the ball and swing the bat like I showed you."

They quickly drew me into the fun and laughter. Luke concentrated so hard as he waited for Gabe to throw the ball that the tip of his tongue stuck out just like Winky's. But the look of pure joy on Luke's face when he finally hit one clear over Gabe's head brought tears to my eyes. Aunt Batty jumped up and down cheering as it sailed past her. Winky waddled around the outfield barking and looking bewildered as he tried to find it. Becky hugged her brother as he passed her at first base.

We were a family, just like the one I used to dream about when I was a kid—except that we weren't a family. Gabe wasn't the daddy and Aunt Batty would eventually go home, and I would be abandoned once more. I couldn't understand why God kept taunting me, giving me what I longed for, then snatching it all away again. My mama was

right—love was just like cotton candy. It disappeared the moment you got a taste of it in your mouth.

While the others cheered and patted Luke on the back, I hurried into the house to hide my tears. I was sitting at the kitchen table with my hands over my face when I heard the screen door open and close behind me.

“Eliza?” Gabe said softly. “Are you all right?” He rested his hand on my shoulder but when he felt me tense up he quickly removed it again. I wiped my eyes with the heels of my hands.

“Yes...I’m fine.”

“I hope I didn’t do something to upset you.”

“It isn’t you, Gabe. I’ll be okay.”

He pulled out the kitchen chair next to mine and sat down, resting his arms on the table. “I worry, sometimes, that doing things together like this brings back too many memories...That it makes you miss Sam.”

I looked up at him in surprise. “No, that’s not it at all. Sam never had a chance to do things like this with me and the kids. It’s just that —” I stopped, shaking my head. “Nevermind.”

“Eliza, you can talk to me when something’s bothering you. You can trust me—”

“Can I really?” I said angrily. “And then you’ll return that trust and share all your secrets with me?”

Gabe stared at me and I knew he was waging an internal battle. I could see it in his eyes. There was pain in them and a loss that was crushing him. Sam had a similar look in his eyes when I first met him. But Gabe seemed to have even more anguish than Sam stuffed deep inside him. I was immediately sorry and I wanted to say so, but it was too late. Gabe quietly shoved back his chair and left.

A few days after the ball game, Luke came home from school as angry as a hornet. I saw him fighting with Jimmy as they came up the driveway, punching and tussling with each other—and they almost never did that.

“What’s wrong with you two?” I called from where I was working with Gabe outside the barn. “Stop it before one of you gets hurt.”

“He started it, Mom,” Jimmy said. “He’s been trying to pick a fight all the way home.”

Luke took a swing at Jimmy and missed. “Sh-shut up!”

“Luke, come here a minute,” I said.

He ignored me, slamming into the house without talking to me. Gabe and I were right in the middle of unhitching the horse from the cultivator, but I planned on getting to the bottom of it as soon as we finished. I’d no sooner walked through the kitchen door a few minutes later when Becky let out a wail and Luke pushed past me like a house-a-fire. All I could get out of Becky between sobs was that Luke had done something mean to make her cry. I left her in Aunt Batty’s arms and followed Luke outside.

When I didn’t see him anywhere, I went looking for him in the barn. I heard Gabe muttering to the horses as he gave them some feed, then I saw Luke’s red hair as he ducked behind a pile of hay. He was sobbing. Gabe hurried around the side of the stall to see who was there.

“Hey, buddy, what’s wrong?” Gabe asked. “No, wait a minute, Luke. Don’t run away. Come here. We’re friends, aren’t we? Can’t you tell me what’s wrong?” Luke didn’t answer, but he sniffled like he was still crying. Neither one of them saw me as I stood outside the door, listening.

“Something happened at school today, didn’t it,” Gabe said. He wasn’t asking a question, it was as if he knew. “I’ll bet I can guess what’s wrong,” he continued. “Give me three tries, okay? And if I



guess your secret, I promise I'll tell you a secret about myself. Do we have a deal?" I didn't hear Luke's reply, but I could tell by what Gabe said next that he must have agreed. "Okay, let's see. I'm guessing that some ignorant loudmouths at school teased you about something—probably something you can't change, like having red hair or not having a father. And their teasing made you feel so angry and upset and confused that before you knew what was happening—boom! You came home and took out your feelings on everyone else. Am I right?"

"How d-did you know?" Luke asked in amazement.

"Well, that's where my little secret comes in. Promise you won't tell anyone?" Gabe spoke so softly I had to strain to listen. "When I was in school the other kids used to make fun of me all the time because I had a lot of trouble talking. I couldn't seem to make the words come out right. I knew what I wanted to say inside my head but my tongue would trip over the words as if it had a huge knot tied in it."

"You st-stuttered like I do?"

"All the time."

"Honest, Mr. Harper?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die. But my stuttering was much, much worse. I couldn't even finish a sentence. Now that I'm all grown up, I think I know why I had a hard time getting my words out."

Gabe paused for such a long time I wasn't sure if he was going to tell Luke or not. When he finally spoke his voice sounded different—softer, yet harder at the same time.

"I was afraid of my father when I was a kid. He talked so loudly when he was angry that he made the walls of the house shake— and my father was angry all the time, usually at me. He expected a lot from me because I was his firstborn son, but I couldn't seem to do anything right. Sometimes my insides would get all twisted up in knots until I thought I was going to be sick, and when he asked me a question the knot would spread to my tongue so I couldn't talk. The

more my father hollered and yelled at me, the w...worse it got.”

I heard the powerful emotions in Gabe’s voice as he stumbled over the word, and I knew he wasn’t just making the story up to help Luke feel better.

“P-promise y-you won’t tell anyone?” Luke asked softly.

“I promise.”

“I was s-scared of my g-grandpa.”

Tears filled my eyes at his words. I remembered how Luke had tried to follow Grandpa Wyatt around after Sam died, so hungry for the love and attention Sam had given him, but the old man could never find it in his heart to show affection. The only emotion he knew how to show was anger. He’d been mean and hateful for so many years that all his feelings came out the same way. So if one of the boys worried him or frightened him, any concern he might have felt came out of his mouth as rage. If Frank had ever loved his children or his grandchildren, he’d never known how to tell them.

“Know what else?” Luke asked. His voice was so close to a whisper I had to stand stock still, careful not to rustle the straw or creak a floorboard, in order to hear him. “I was w-with Grandpa...when...he f-fell.”

I caught my breath, unaware I was holding it until my lungs nearly burst. Gabe’s voice was gentle. “The day he died, you mean?”

“Uh-huh. Grandpa fell over...and then he looked up at me. He said ‘help’...but I r-ran away.”

“Because you were scared, Luke?”

“No...I was m-mad. Grandpa wouldn’t help Daddy when he got sick. So I w-wouldn’t help Grandpa.”

I covered my face and wept silent tears. God help me, I might have done the same thing if Frank Wyatt had asked me for help. But it nearly broke my heart to think that Luke had carried such a heavy burden all alone, all this time. I was about to give myself away, to run

and gather Luke in my arms, when I heard Gabe say, “Come here, son.”

I could tell by the shuffling sounds and by Luke’s muffled sobs that Gabe had taken him in his arms. I think all three of us were crying, because when Gabe spoke again his voice was breaking.

“Listen, Luke...and I want you to really listen. Every single one of us has done things when we’re angry that we’re sorry for later.”

I remembered the angry words I’d hurled at my daddy and I stifled a sob.

“But God knows if we’re sorry in our hearts—and He forgives us. Then we need to forgive ourselves. But listen to me...are you listening, Luke? It wasn’t your fault that your grandfather died. It *wasn’t*. Even if you had gone for help as soon as your grandfather fell, it wouldn’t have made any difference. Your mama told me he had a heart attack. And there’s not a thing in the world anyone could’ve done about it. Do you understand? Not you, not the doctor...no one. You don’t need to feel bad about it anymore.”

Luke began to weep, great heartbreaking cries that I knew would heal him in the end. I quickly turned and ran from the barn so that I could mourn for all that Luke had lost. It wasn’t until later, when I’d returned to the kitchen to help Aunt Batty make supper, that I remembered what Gabe had said—I *was my father’s firstborn son*. Just like Matthew.

“Is Becky all right?” I asked Aunt Batty as I pulled a paring knife out of the drawer to help her peel potatoes.

“She’s fine. We had a little talk. Did you get everything straightened out with poor little Luke?”

“Gabe is talking to him,” I said. Then I had another thought. “Aunt Batty, did Matthew stutter when he was a boy?”

The potato she was peeling slipped out of her hand and rolled across the table. She quickly scooped it up, then patted my arm with

her starchy hand. “Don’t you worry about little Luke. He’ll outgrow his stuttering one of these days.”

“Like Matthew did?”

She didn’t answer me, concentrating as she peeled the skin off in one long, dangling curl—a trick I had never mastered.

“Trouble plagued Matthew’s life from the moment he was conceived,” she finally said. “I often wondered if he would have had a happier life if Lydia had given him up for adoption like I wanted her to. Of course, then I would have been the one who’d had to endure Frank Wyatt all those years.”

I didn’t say anything to Gabe during supper, but after we’d eaten and I’d cleaned up the dishes, I went out to the barn to find him and thank him for talking to Luke. The light was on in the workshop where Gabe slept, so I knocked on the door. He didn’t answer. I pushed it open and peeked inside.

“Gabe?”

The room was empty. Not two feet away, propped on an overturned apple crate, stood Gabe’s typewriter. There was a sheet of paper in it with words typed on it. The paper stuck out as if he had walked away in the middle of writing something. My curiosity was too great to resist. I bent over to read it:

*My father is everywhere. There are no pictures of him, no pipes or tobacco pouches or favorite chairs to remind me of his habits and gestures, but he’s everywhere, just the same. He’s in the wind that whistles through the open door of the barn and raises the dust I forgot to sweep. I hear his voice, feel his censure in the sagging fence post and in the tool I failed to return to its proper place.*

*I came back to make amends with him. I came back because I missed the land and I longed for home all the years I was away. Every field and barn I marched past in France beckoned to me to stop and to turn a spade through the rich earth and to inhale the familiar fragrance of horse and hay. I was once reproved for breaking rank to stop beside a pasture fence to stroke*

*a mare, but I craved the familiar roughness of her tawny coat. I offered a French farmer my weekly allotment of cigarettes if he would simply allow me to come inside his barn and milk his only cow.*

*I hated my father, but I loved the land. Eventually the love outweighed the hatred and it drew me home. I hungered for the changing seasons in the orchard: the stark beauty of naked branches against the winter sky; the lacy pink capes that clothed them in spring; the fruit hanging heavy from them in summer like gaudy jewels; the leafy flames that consumed them at the autumn sacrifice. I came home to make amends, to say I was sorry for the bitter words we'd hurled at each other when we parted. But it's too late. My father is gone.*

*Yet he's everywhere, and I cannot stay.*

*I'll keep my promise to bring in the harvest, but my father is here and nothing I do pleases him. I can never be happy in a place where I've known so much pain....*

I slipped out of the workshop and returned to the house, more certain than I'd ever been that Gabe was Matthew Wyatt. But what should I do about it? I loved Wyatt Orchards, too, and I was scared to death that I would lose it. And I was scared to death that I was in love with Gabe and certain that I would lose him. Hadn't he just written that he could never stay here? Everything seemed so tangled up I feared I would never get it straightened out. I finally decided to wait a little longer and see what clues John Wakefield's letter to Washington would turn up.

It was time for the hay to be cut and mowed, then forked onto the wagon and stored in the barn. It was hot, itchy work. Jimmy and Luke helped us out. School had closed a few weeks early when the district ran out of money to pay the teachers. We worked from dawn until sunset, and at the end of each long, hot day Gabe took the boys down to Aunt Batty's pond for a swim. I once saw him pull off his shirt as they headed down the hill and I caught a quick glimpse of that

terrible, jagged scar above his heart.

“A few more weeks and it’ll be time for the cherry pickers to start coming,” Aunt Batty reminded me one morning when we’d finished the haying.

“You’re right. We’d better clean up the pickers’ quarters and wash the bedding before they get here.” I had done it every year when Sam and Frank were still alive, so at least I would be doing a familiar job.

Aunt Batty and I were working together one morning, filling straw ticks with fresh hay when an ancient, sputtering Ford pulled into my driveway. I should have known such a relic of a car could only belong to Mr. Wakefield. He stepped out and greeted us with a bow and a tip of his hat.

“Good morning, Mrs. Wyatt. Mrs. Gibson. How are you ladies this morning?”

“I’m fine, John,” Aunt Batty replied. “It’s good to see you again.” I could tell by her beaming face that if he’d given her a million dollars it wouldn’t have been as great a gift as calling her by her married name.

“Would you like to come inside for a cup of coffee, Mr. Wakefield?” I asked. He had his briefcase with him and I wanted to be sitting down if he had any important news to share.

“Well, sure, if you don’t mind. Though I hate to disturb you ladies. You look pretty busy....”

“Go ahead, Toots,” Aunt Batty said. “I can manage without you for a while.”

I sat Mr. Wakefield down at my kitchen table and put a cup of coffee and a piece of Aunt Batty’s rhubarb pie in front of him as he opened his briefcase.

“I have good news this time, Eliza,” he said. “I finally received word from Washington. They’ve confirmed that Matthew Wyatt did *not* die during the war.”

I sank onto a chair as my knees suddenly gave out. “So...he’s alive?”

“Well, he was still alive as of December 1918. Matthew received an honorable discharge on the twelfth of that month in 1918. Here’s a copy of the information listed on his discharge papers if you’d like to see it.”

I scanned the document while Mr. Wakefield devoured his pie. Matthew had served in the infantry as part of the American Expeditionary Forces stationed in France. The papers listed the battles and campaigns he’d participated in—Cantigny, Belleau Wood, St. Mihiel—and the decorations and citations he’d received. His hair color was listed as brown, his eyes brown, and his height and weight seemed about the same as Gabe’s, too.

“What does this mean?” I asked. “It says ‘date of separation...destination...reason and authority for separation.’ ”

Mr. Wakefield swallowed a quick sip of coffee before setting down his cup to explain. “Evidently Matthew was hospitalized in France for shrapnel wounds he received at the Battle of St. Mihiel shortly before the war ended. They sent him home to the United States to recover—that’s the ‘separation’ it mentions. They discharged him directly from the army hospital.”

I recalled the scar above Gabe’s heart and wondered what a shrapnel wound looked like. “What’s the next step?” I asked. “We know he’s alive, but how do we go about finding him?”

“I’m going to write to the army hospital that discharged him to ask if they have a forwarding address for him. Once again, getting an answer may take a while—and a lot of time has passed since he was discharged—but I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.”

He eagerly accepted a second piece of pie.

I rejoined Aunt Batty after Mr. Wakefield left. My face must have told her I was upset because the first thing she asked was, “More troubles, Toots?”

I nodded. “Mr. Wakefield came to tell me about Matthew Wyatt. It seems he didn’t die in the war after all. Matthew might still be alive.”

She stopped stuffing straw. She closed her eyes as joy and relief flooded her face. “Matthew’s alive! Imagine! After all this time!”

“Yes, and I need to find him, Aunt Batty. The kids and I are in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble could you sweet things be in?”

I took a deep breath and let it all out at once. “It seems that I don’t own this house or the orchard after all. Frank Wyatt willed everything to Matthew.”

“No! I don’t believe it!” she exclaimed. “That has to be a mistake!”

I sat down beside her. “It’s not a mistake. Mr. Wakefield showed me Frank’s will.”

Aunt Batty shook her head, insistent. “Frank would *never* give Wyatt Orchards to Matthew. Never in a million years! Not after he learned the truth.”

I stared at her. “The truth? You mean Frank found out that Matthew wasn’t his son?”

“Yes.”

I suddenly recalled a line from Gabe’s story: *The night I found out that he wasn’t my real father I felt born again*. I shivered.

“Aunt Batty, did Matthew know that Frank wasn’t his real father, too?”

“Yes. They both found out. And I happened to be there the day they did....”



# DEEL V

## Wyatt-boorde

*Somer 1931*

Dit is U aan wie dag en nag behoort, U wat aan die son  
en die maan hulle plek gegee het, U wat al die seisoene van die aarde  
vasgestel het;  
somer en winter is die werk van u hand.

Psalm 74:16-17

## ~ Hoofstuk twaalf ~

Toe tannie Batty klaar haar verhaal vertel het, kyk ek stomgeslaan na haar. “Is Tannie Betsy Gibson? Het Tannie al daardie boeke geskryf wat ek as jong meisie verslind het?” Ek en Gabe het haar oorreed om terug te gaan in die huis in waar sy haar verhaal by die kombuistafel saam met ’n pot koffie vertel het.

“Ja, dit is my regte getroude naam,” sê tannie Batty. Sy dra altyd ’n dun goue kettinkie om haar nek en nou bring sy dit van onder haar nagrok te voorskyn. ’n Goue trouband hang daaraan. “Ek hou daarvan om Walter se ring naby aan my hart te dra,” sê sy.

“En Tannie is Herman Walters ook?” vra Gabe. Hy lyk nog meer dronkgeslaan as ek.

“Ja ... Ek hoop jy is nie te teleurgesteld om te ontdek dat Herman Walters ’n vrou is nie.”

“Glad nie! Dit is net wonderlik om hom ... of haar ... ek bedoel Tannie uiteindelik te ontmoet.” Hy spring van sy stoel af op en buk oor die klein tannie Batty voordat hy haar soos ’n langverlore familielid vasdruk. “Tannie se stories het my lewe gered toe ek ’n seun was,” sê hy, sy stem hees van emosie. “Ek bedoel dit regtig. Dit was soms die enigste uitvlug wat ek gehad van ... alles.”

“Ek is bly ek kon help,” sê sy en klop hom op die rug.

Ek kry skielik ’n idee oor hoe tannie Batty my en my kinders ook kan red, maar ek is doodbang om te vra. Sê nou sy voel beledig en storm uit die huis uit en verlaat ons? As ek nie vra nie, het ons egter oor twee dae nie meer ’n huis nie.

“Tannie Batty, wat het van die trustfonds geword wat Walter vir Tannie gelos het?” skraap ek uiteindelik die moed bymekaar om te vra. “Het dit die ineenstorting van die effektebeurs oorleef?”

“Ek weet nie en ek gee nie om nie. Walter het vir my meer geld gelos as wat ek ooit sou nodig kry. Veral toe my eie boeke soos soetkoek begin verkoop.”

“Is daar dalk nog in meneer Preston se bank?” vra ek.

“Watwou! Ek het nog nooit daardie hardkoppige man en sy bank, of enigiemand anders se bank, met my geld vertrou nie. Die trustfonds betaal dit elke maand in en ek gaan trek dit elke maand.”

“Dit was nou eintlik ’n baie wyse besluit,” sê Gabe, “veral as ’n mens in ag neem hoeveel banke die afgelope jaar moes toemaak.”

Ek sien in my gedagtes hoe ek en my kinders soos boemelaars leef en ek skraap al my moed bymekaar om te vra: “Tannie Batty, as daar dalk nog van die geld oor is ... Kan ek vyfhonderd dollar leen? Ek sal Tannie terugbetaal sodra ons hierdie jaar se oes inbring.”

“Natuurlik, Toots. Vat soveel as wat jy nodig het. Waarvoor het ek dit tog nodig? Hoe gou wil jy dit hê?”

“Nou dadelik. Vandag.”

Sy staan op en begin haar jas aantrek. “Nou goed, kom ons gaan.”

Gabe kyk verbaas na my. “Moet jy haar nie eers laat aantrek nie, Eliza?”

Ek het ook nog my nagklere aan, maar het nie my jas uitgetrek nie. “Nee, asseblief, ek is bang as ons nie nou gaan nie ... ” Ek wil nie hardop sê dat tannie Batty se geheue haar soms in die steek laat nie. Ek is bang as ons nie nou gaan terwyl dit nog vars is in haar gedagtes nie, gaan sy vergeet waar sy haar geld gebêre het.

Gabe frons toe ek vir tannie Batty haar skoene aangee. Hy frons steeds terwyl hy ons twee vroue met ons nagklere aan teen die heuwel af na die kothuis volg. Ek is opgewonde; tog bang om te veel te hoop. Vir al wat tannie Batty omgee, kan die geld netsowel Spaanse muntstukke wees of nog in die ou geldeenheid wat nie meer gebruik word nie.

Alles in haar kothuis is nog deurmekaar, maar ek is verlig om te sien haar voorkamer en haar enorme lessenaar het op ’n wonderbaarlike manier die winterskade vrygespring. Ons het al die boeke verwyder wat op die onderste rakke was en dit is steeds weggepak, maar tannie Batty begin tussen die oorblywende boeke soek en bestudeer die titels.

“Soek na stories oor gierigheid,” sê sy. “Dis waar ek die groter note gebêre het.”

“Hier is *Silas Marner*,” sê Gabe en haal dit van die boonste rak af. Hy gee dit vir haar. “Sal dit help?”

“Ja, dit is ’n uitstekende keuse, Gabe.”

Sy hou die boek aan die rugkant vas en skud dit dan met die bladsye na onder totdat die geld wat sy daarin weggesteek het na die vloer toe fladder. Dit is regte geld! Tannie Batty tel drie twintigdollarnote, twee vyftigdollarnote en ’n honderddollarnoot op. My hart klop opgewonde toe ek terugdraai na die boekrakke. Ek het nog nooit van die helfte van die boeke gehoor nie, maar ek steek vas toe ek Charles Dickens se *A Christmas Carol* sien. “Wat van Ebenezer Scrooge se storie?” vra ek.

“Nog beter. Maak dit oop en kyk, Eliza.”

Ek draai die boek onderstebo en skud die bladsye los, net soos sy gemaak het.

“Geseënde Kersfees! En mag God elkeen van ons seën,” juig tannie Batty toe drie honderddollarnote uitval. Ons het in net twee boeke meer geld gekry as wat ek nodig het.

“Wel, wat het ons hier?” sê tannie Batty skielik. Gabe het *Treasure Island* van die rak afgehaal en ’n brief het uitgeval.

“Wat is dit?” vra ek vir haar.

“Onthou jy die laaste brief van Matthew waarvan ek jou vertel het? Hier is dit. Ek het dit in een van sy gunsteling boeke weggesteek.”

Die koevert wat sy vir my aangee, is pap en so dun soos sneespapier. Matthew het dit op ’n hotel in Frankryk se skryfblok geskryf:

*14 April 1918*

*Liewe tannie Betty*

*Dankie dat Tannie geskryf en die nuus oor my ma meegedeel het. Ek het al so baie dood hier gesien dat ek seker teen hierdie tyd gewoon moet wees daaraan, maar ek is nie. Ek was lief vir haar. Sy het ook nooit opgehou om lief te wees vir my en Tannie nie, of hoe? Kyk asseblief na Sam, ter wille van haar. En ter wille van my ook. Moenie dat sy pa hom vernietig soos hy die res van ons vernietig het nie.*

*Al my liefde*

*Matthew*

Die feit dat ons die brief gekry het, sal my egter nie help om die geheimenis te ontfel en uit te vind of Gabe eintlik Matthew Wyatt is of nie. Buiten vir die handtekening is die brief getik. Ek sit dit terug in die koevert en bêre dit weer in *Treasure Island*.

“Hier is jou geld, Toots,” sê tannie Batty en druk die note in my hande. Vir ’n oomblik is ek te oorweldig om te praat. Ek het genoeg vir die verband! Meer as genoeg.

“Ek ... Ek sal Tannie terugbetaal. Ek belowe ...”

Sy beduie met haar hand. “Ek wil dit nie terughê nie.”

“Nee, ek kan dit net vat as Tannie sê dit is ’n lening. Ek is vas van plan om Tannie terug te betaal sodra ek ons vrugte verkoop.”

Sy stap van my en Gabe af weg en gaan staan voor die venster terwyl sy na buite staar, asof diep ingedagte. “Ek sê jou wat, Toots,” sê sy uiteindelik toe sy omdraai en vir ons kyk. “Ek wou hierdie dam, Walter se dam, nog altyd gehad het. Sal jy dit aan my verkoop vir vyfhonderd dollar?”

“Enige tyd,” sê ek en vee trane van verligting van my wange af. “Dis ’n ooreenkoms.”

Ek kyk nou vir die eerste keer om my rond en besef Gabe is klaar met die kombuis se dak en die gemors is opgeruim. Die paneelwerk kan doen met 'n laag verf en Gabe se houtwerk sal nooit eerste prys by die skou wen nie, maar tannie Batty kan weer haar kombuis gebruik.

“Hoe lank gelede het jy hier klaargemaak?” vra ek vir Gabe.

Hy trek sy skouers op. “'n Maand of so.”

Ek staar verwonderd na tannie Batty. “En Tannie het my nie alleen gelos nie? Tannie het by my gebly?” Dit lyk vir my na 'n nog groter wonderwerk as die geld wat ons gekry het.

“Jy het my nodig, Toots,” sê sy. “Jy en daardie wonderlike kinders van jou. Hoe kon ek julle almal sommer net verlaat?”

“Maar ... maar Tannie het die hele tyd so hard gewerk in my huis ... en dit was nie nodig nie.”

Sy trek my tot in haar arms. “Dit is nie werk wanneer jy iemand liefhet nie.”

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Op die dag dat die verband betaal moet word, stap ek by meneer Preston se bank in en gee vir hom die \$528,79 wat Frank Wyatt hom skuld. Meneer Preston lyk geskok. En 'n klein bietjie teleurgesteld.

“Wel, mevrou Wyatt, wat het ons hier? Frank Wyatt het seker 'n paar note onder sy matras weggesteek, of hoe?”

Ek onthou nog hoe ek die geld tussen die bladsye van Ebenezer Scrooge se storie gekry het en glimlag. “Dit het regtig niks met jou te doen nie, meneer Preston.”

Terwyl ek huis toe ry, voel ek gelukkiger as wat ek in 'n lang tyd gevoel het. Tog is die moeilikheid daarop uit om my te agtervolg. Kan jy glo dat sodra ek die een krisis oorkom 'n ander een sy aaklige kop uitsteek? Hierdie keer draai die weer teen my. Gabe het tannie Batty se radio in die bakkie gelaai en dit na my plaashuis toe gebring sodat ons almal dit kan geniet. Dit is hoe ons die aankondiging hoor: Die weerburo reik 'n waarskuwing uit vir ryp in ons omgewing.

“O gats, dit is slegte nuus,” sê tannie Batty en skud haar kop. “Ryp kan die bloeisels doodmaak. Geen bloeisels beteken geen vrugte.”

“Vuurpotte!” sê ek toe ek onthou. “My skoonpa het altyd vuurpotte in die kersie- en peerboorde gesit as daar ryp sou kom. Hy het dit vol olie gemaak, in elkeen 'n mieliestronk laat dryf vir 'n lont en dit die hele nag laat brand.”

Gabe is reeds op sy voete. “Ons moet aan die gang kom voordat die temperatuur daal.”

Al ses van ons trek warm aan en spring aan die werk. Becky en tannie Batty gaan haal mieliestronke terwyl die res van ons honderde potte uit die appelskuur se solder haal en dit agterop die bakkie laai. Toe ons dit egter uit die groot olietenk begin vol maak, ontdek ons dit is byna leeg. Daar is ook geen plek om hierdie tyd van die aand olie te koop nie. Ek is so omgekrap dat ek nie helder kan dink nie.

“Luister, dit sal oukei wees,” troos Gabe. “Ons hoef dit nie nou al aan te steek nie, en ons hoef ook nie al die potte tot bo vol te maak nie. Ons gooi net ’n bietjie olie in elkeen, dan sal ek wakker bly en nog ingooi wanneer dit begin uitbrand.”

Ek onthou skielik die verhaal in die Bybel van die weduwee en haar kinders wat net so in die knyp was soos ek nou is. God het gesê sy moet geloof hê en net die kruike wat sy het aanhou vol maak met olie, en die oliekan het nie leeg geword totdat sy klaar was nie. Ek skat tannie Batty se gebede moes ons daardie aand gehelp het, want dit is presies wat met my oliedrom gebeur. Gabe maak die vuurpotte halfvol en selfs al verwag ek dat die oliedrom enige oomblik leeg gaan wees, gebeur dit nie. Ons sit al die vuurpotte naby die bome wat die kwesbaarste is en dan stuur ek vir tannie Batty en die kinders bed toe. En ek Gabe het elkeen ’n ekstra vyfliter-kan vol olie en nadat ons die vuurpotte rondom middernag aangesteek het, bly ons die hele nag wakker om dit te hervul wanneer dit begin uitbrand.

Die moeilikste deel is om wakker te bly. Teen vyfuur die oggend is ek doodmoeg. Ek hervul al die potte wat dit nodig het en klim dan in die bakkie om vir ’n oomblik te rus en warm te word. Ek het net my kop agteroor laat sak en my oë toegemaak toe Gabe die deur aan die passasierskant oopmaak.

“Mag ek by jou aansluit?” vra hy en vryf sy hande teen mekaar om warm te word.

“Natuurlik, klim in.” Ek sluit die enjin aan sodat die verwarmer ons albei kan warm maak. “Jy moet met my gesels,” sê ek en maak weer my oë toe, “anders gaan ek aan die slaap raak.”

“Hoekom gaan jy nie huis toe en klim in die bed nie, Eliza? Ek kan alleen hier klaarmaak. Die son gaan binnekort opkom.”

“Nee,” gaap ek. “Ons is nou op die punt waar dit regtig boonskrap gaan en fyn voetwerk gaan nodig wees om al daardie vure op jou eie aan die brand te hou.”

Gabe lag. “Ek het vannag met tye soos een van daardie ouens in die sirkus gevoel wat ’n dosyn borde op een slag moet balanseer terwyl almal in die

ronde draai.”

“Terwyl jy ’n eenwielfiets ry,” voeg ek by en lag saam, “sonder dat enige daarvan afval en breek.”

“Maar ons het dit reggekry,” sê hy met ’n tevrede sug. “Ons moet onself gelukwens.” Hy steek sy hand uit en wag dat ek dit moet vat.

Ek aarsel, maar steek dan tog my hand uit en skud syne vlugtig. Gabe se vel is grof en vol eelte, sy greep stewig. Ons raak net vlugtig aan mekaar, maar dit stuur ’n rilling deur my wat al die pad tot by my tone gaan. Ek hoop hy merk nie op dat dit my ontsenu nie.

“Is jy warm genoeg?” vra ek. Toe Gabe knik, sluit ek die enjin af. Die skielike stilte ontsenu my nog meer en ek begin babbel, net soos Becky altyd maak. “Jy weet, in al die tyd wat my skoonpa hierdie plek bestuur het, het ek nooit besef hoe veeleisend dit is nie. Ek het my eie werkies gehad om in die huis te doen en ek moes ook na die kinders kyk; daarom het ek my nooit regtig gesteur aan wat hier in die boord aan die gang is nie. Ek weet egter hulle albei was nodig om alles gedoen te kry. Frank moes iemand huur om te help vir ’n ruk nadat ... Toe dit net hy was.” Ek bly net so skielik stil as wat ek begin praat het.

“Kan ek jou iets vra?” sê Gabe na ’n rukkie se stilte. Hy klink so ernstig dat dit my laat skrik.

“Jy kan vra, alhoewel ek nie kan belowe dat ek sal antwoord nie.”

“Jy praat nie eintlik oor jou man nie,” sê hy. “Jou kinders begin oor hom praat en ek dink dit help hulle om oor hom te rou. Tog kom ek agter dat jy dit nie doen nie. Jy sê amper nooit eers sy naam nie. Jy het dit nou net vermy toe jy van hom gepraat het.”

“Dit is nie ’n vraag nie.”

“Ek weet. Die vraag is: Hoekom nie? Dit het eintlik niks met my te doen nie.” Hy sug. “Ek is moeg, so ek sukkel om myself reg uit te druk. Wat ek eintlik wil sê, is as jy ooit die behoefte het om te praat ... as jy ooit oor Sam wil praat ... Ek sal enige tyd luister.”

“Dankie.”

Gabe wag. Die lang stilte raak ongemaklik. Ek weet hy verwag dat ek al die smart gaan uitstort wat ek al vir so lank opkrop, maar ek het niks om te sê nie. Hy verbreek uiteindelik die stilte.

“Ek dink een van die dinge wat dit vir jou kinders so moeilik maak, is dat hulle pa so geheel en al weg is. Daar is geen foto’s van hom nie, niks wat syne was wat iewers in die huis rondlê nie, geen teken dat hy ooit bestaan het buiten vir hierdie klere wat jy vir my geleen het of eienskappe van hom wat hulle dalk in mekaar sien nie – soos die kleur van sy hare of sy oë.”

“Dit is my skoonpa se skuld. Hy het dieselfde ding ná elkeen van hulle se dood gedoen. Hy het alle tekens van hulle bestaan uitgewis. Daar is ook geen foto’s van sy vrou en ander seuns nie.”

“Maar Frank Wyatt is nou dood. Jy kan die herinnering aan Sam terugbring as jy wil.”

“Ek wil nie. Ek dink dit is beter so.” Ek voel na aan trane en ek weet nie hoekom nie. Hoe kan ek teenoor Gabe erken dat die hartseer wat ek voel elke keer wanneer ek aan Sam dink of sy naam noem, veroorsaak word deur skuldgevoelens en nie omdat ek rou nie?

“Het Becky en Luke hulle rooi hare by hom gekry?” vra hy sag.

“Nee. By my ma.” Die oomblik toe ek hom vertel het, is ek spyt daaroor. As hy my oor haar gaan begin uitvra, sal die damwal verseker breek. Gelukkig doen hy dit nie. Hy haak steeds by Sam vas.

“Ek kan nie help om te wonder watter soort mens jou man was nie. Ek het ’n baie duidelike prentjie van die mens wat sy pa was, maar nie van hom nie.”

Ek besef dat ek ook nie ’n duidelike prentjie van Sam het nie, en ek was nege jaar lank met hom getroud. Die waarheid maak my kwaad en dit sit my aan die praat, want ek weet dit is nie my of Sam se skuld nie. Dit is sy pa s’n.

“Sam het nooit ’n kans gekry om uit te vind wie hy regtig is nie,” sê ek en my stem bewe. “Hy het al sy drome en gevoelens diep in sy binnestes gebêre en sy lewe lank so probeer leef sodat hy die seun kan wees wat sy pa wou hê hy moes wees; hom probeer tevrede stel. Ek sê ‘probeer’, want niemand kon ooit vir Frank Wyatt tevrede stel nie. Hy kon nooit al die dinge sien wat jy reg doen nie, net dit wat jy verkeerd doen. Hy was soos daardie man in die Bybel wat die splinter uit iemand anders se oog probeer haal. Ek het eenkeer ’n prediker oor daardie vers hoor preek. Dit was toevallig naby ’n houtwerf en ek het kort voor die preek al daardie hope stompe oral gesien. Ek kon my daardie miserabele man in die gelykenis indink met een van daardie stompe in sy oog en ek het gedink dit moes hom baie seermaak. ’n Bietjie stof in jou oog is al erg genoeg.

“Toe ontmoet ek my skoonpa,” gaan ek voort. “Hy het een van daardie reusestompe in elke oog gehad en dit het hom blind gemaak. Hy kon nie vir Sam sien nie; hy kon nie eens sy kleinkinders sien nie. Al wat hy ooit kon doen, was kritiseer, en hy het nooit aan hulle enige dankbaarheid of goedkeuring bewys nie. Wat nog erger was, is dat daardie stompe vir Frank soveel pyn veroorsaak het dat hy die hele tyd soos ’n gewonde dier teen almal uitgevaar het. Ek was byna jaloers op Sam toe hy dood is en kon wegkom van sy pa af. Ek hoop die Goeie Here het aan die ander kant vir hom gewag en dat Sam uiteindelik sou hoor hoe iemand sê: ‘Mooi so, my goeie en getroue



slaaf.”

Gabe is baie stil. Die enjin maak ’n sagte *tik*-geluid terwyl dit afkoel. Dan sê Gabe sag: “My pa was dieselfde tipe man.” Ek beweeg nie, sê nie ’n woord nie, bang dat hy nie sal voortgaan nie. “Die ding is – ”

Maar dan bly Gabe stil. Hy skud sy kop en dit lyk of sy hele lyf ril, asof hy homself nie sover kan bring om oor die man te praat nie. Ek verstaan. Ek kan ook nie oor my pa praat nie. Ons albei het ’n muur bereik waaroor ons nie bereid is om te klim nie.

“Hei, die son kom op,” sê hy skielik. “Dalk kan ons hierdie vure uiteindelik laat uitbrand.”

Hy klim uit en loop om die bakkie waar hy teen die voorkant leun om na die sonsopkoms te kyk. Ek klim ook uit en gaan staan langs hom, strek my uit.

“Ek sal vandag gou dorp toe gaan om nog olie te gaan koop,” sê ek. “Dan kan ons die vuurpotte tot bo vol maak en dit vanaand op hulle eie laat brand.”

Ek sien uit die hoek van my oog hoe Gabe na my kyk. Hy byt op sy lip en doen sy bes om nie te glimlag nie.

“Wat is so snaaks?” vra ek en kyk stip na hom.

“Jou gesig. Dit is pikswart. Jy lyk verskriklik.”

Ek kan my glimlag nie keer nie. “Jy ook.”

Gabe lag toe hy ’n sakdoek uit sy sak haal. “Hier, staan stil. Ek sal dit vir jou afgee.” Met sy een hand hou hy my kop aan die agterkant vas en dan begin hy my gesig met die sakdoek afgee. Ons staan net sentimeters van mekaar af, nader as nog ooit tevore, en my hart begin soos ’n skoolmeisie s’n klop. Gabe hou skielik op. Ek maak die fout om in sy oë te kyk op dieselfde oomblik dat hy in myne kyk. Sy oë is so sag en warm soos gesmelte sjokolade. Sy een hand hou steeds my kop vas en hy trek my sagkens nader, maak uiteindelik sy oë toe wanneer ons lippe ontmoet.

Dié soen is soos ’n vuurhoutjie wat naby olie kom. Gabe sit sy ander arm om my lyf en druk my teen hom vas. Wat as ’n teer soen begin, groei vinnig in intensiteit. Ek sit my arms om sy lyf, klou aan hom vas en soen hom terug met ’n passie wat ek nog nooit voorheen beleef het nie. Die gevoelens wat deur my kolk, maak my bang, die krag daarvan laat my skrik. Ek voel veilig in sy arms, beskut, selfs terwyl al die skanse wat ek gebou het om myself te beskerm tot as verkrummel. Ek is verlief op Gabe, dis so eenvoudig soos dit.

Ek weet nie wat van ons sou geword het as dit nie vir Winky was nie. Tannie Batty het hom seker laat uitkom sodat hy ’n draai kan loop. Hy bekruip vir my en Gabe, kom sit by ons voete en blaf skielik. Die onverwagse geluid laat my uit Gabe se arms spring. Winky is net ’n lawwe, halfblinde hond en ek en Gabe het net gesoen, maar dit voel of my pa my uitgevang het

terwyl ek iets doen wat ek nie moet nie. Ek val byna oor een van die oliekanne toe ek vinnig van Gabe af wegstaan. Hy steek sy hand uit om my regop te hou, maar ek draai van sy gevaarlike aanraking af weg. Eerste maal gevang, tweede maal bang, soos tannie Peanut altyd gesê het. Ek begin hardloop.

“Eliza, wag!”

“Nee. Bly weg van my af.”

“Maar hoekom?”

Ek draai om om vir hom te kyk en begin dan van kop tot toon bewe toe ek die waarheid besef. “Want ek weet nie eens wie jy is nie.”

Gabe kon nie meer verbaas gelyk het as ek hom met ’n plank teen kop die geslaan het nie. Ek draai om en stap haastig weg voordat hy tyd het om te herstel, maar ek kan sweer ek hoor hom mompel: “Ek ook nie ... ”

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Ná daardie oggend is ek bang om weer naby Gabe te kom. Dit is nie dat ek hom nie vertrou nie. Die waarheid is dat ek myself nie vertrou nie. Ek sorg dat ek nie alleen by hom is nie en wanneer dit nie anders kan nie en ek saam met hom moet werk, hou ek Winky tussen ons as ’n herinnering. Buiten vir die hantering van die spuittoestel kan die meeste ander take soos om die planter heen en weer oor die landerye te stuur, deur net een van ons gedoen word. Ek maak seker ons bly van mekaar af weg.

Terwyl ek ploeg en plant en spuit, memoriseer ek baie gou elke stukkie van die boord. Ek begin die groot werkperde in plaas van die trekker gebruik om brandstof te spaar en namate die tyd verbygaan, begin ek hulle stille geselskap geniet. Hulle herinner my aan die pragtige Percheron-perde wat ek as kind geken het.

Terwyl lente oorgaan in somer en die appelbloeisels verdroog, vind ’n geleidelike verandering in my plaas totdat ek een oggend, waar ek in die middel van die boord staan, besef dit is nie meer Frank Wyatt se bome nie – dit is myne. Myne! Ek het hulle gesnoei en bemes en deur die ryp versorg en hulle teen insekte beskerm. Ek het lief geword vir my grond en ek gee nie om wie se naam op die titelakte is nie – ek sal hierdie boord net so min sonder ’n geveg vir Matthew Wyatt gee as wat ek Jimmy of Luke of Becky Jean vir hom sou gee.

My prokureur het nog steeds niks van Matthew gehoor nie. Ek hoef dus nog nie die boord te oorhandig nie, maar namate die tyd verbygaan, voel dit

wel of ek my kinders vir Gabe Harper gee. Ek bekommer my vreeslik daaroor. Gabe het Becky se hart gewen toe hy die swaai gemaak het, en nou bring hy ook baie van sy vrye tyd saam met Jimmy en Luke deur en leer hy hulle allerhande goed, soos hoe om 'n knipmes te gooi dat dit in die grond vassteek. Toe Jimmy egter een middag met sy pa se visstok by die huis inkom, is dit die laaste strooi.

“Mamma! Kyk wat kry ons in die werkswinkel. Meneer Harper het gesê hy sal Saterdag saam met ons gaan visvang, soos Pappa altyd gedoen het.”

Ek gryp die visstok by Jimmy en storm by die huis uit op soek na Gabe. Hy is besig om die werkswinkel skoon te maak en hy hang al die gereedskap aan spykers op, soos Frank Wyatt dit altyd gedoen het. Gabe staar my verbaas aan toe ek die visstok voor hom op die grond neergooi.

“Hier! Bêre die ding waar jy dit gekry het en jy beter dit nie durf waag om saam met my seuns te gaan visvang nie.”

Hy lyk verdwaas toe hy buk om dit op te tel. “Hoekom nie?”

*Want hulle sal lief word vir jou en dan sal jy hulle hart breek wanneer jy van ons af weggaan*, skree my hart, maar ek kan dit nie hardop sê nie.

“Want jy moes nooit in die eerste plek belowe het om saam met hulle te gaan visvang nie,” sê ek. “Jy is nie hulle pa nie.”

“Ek weet ek is nie.” Sy kneukels word spierwit om die visstok wat hy nou so styf vashou dat ek seker is hy gaan dit middeldeur breek. Hy gee 'n tree nader aan my. “Jimmy het my gehelp om hierbinne op te ruim en hy het die visstok gekry. Hy het my gevra of ek ooit gaan visvang het toe ek 'n kind was en toe ek sê dat ek het, het hy my gesmeek om hom te vat. Hoe kan ek vir hom nee sê, Eliza? Hoe?”

Ek antwoord nie. Ek en Gabe staar lank na mekaar totdat hy uiteindelik sê: “As jy nie wil hê ek moet hulle vat om te gaan visvang nie, sal ek dit nie doen nie. Jy gaan egter die een wees wat dit vir hulle vertel, want ek kan dit nie doen nie.”

My oë skiet vol trane. Ek is so kwaad dat ek bewoed daarvan. “Jy moet dit nie waag om my kinders seer te maak nie, Gabe Harper. Die lewe het hulle al seer genoeg gemaak.”

Hy gooi die visstok neer en gryp my aan die skouers. Sy gesig is kwaad, sy greep hard, maar toe hy praat, is sy stem sag. “As ek ooit enigeen van julle seermaak, belowe ek dit sal nie doelbewus wees nie. Dit sal wees omdat ... omdat dit buite my beheer is.” Dan los hy my en stap kwaad by die werkswinkel uit.

Vrydagaand ná donker gaan soek Gabe en die seuns in die tuin na erdwurms en sit dit in 'n ou blikkan. Vroeg Saterdagoggend ry die drie van

hulle met die bakkie rivier toe om te gaan visvang. Jimmy en Luke vang elkeen 'n paar visse en hulle is in die sewende hemel. Tannie Batty maak die vis skoon en maak dit vir aandete gaar. Ek het egter geen eetlus nie.

Die visvanguitstappie is maar net die begin en hulle bring al hoe meer tyd saam deur. Die seuns smee Gabe om saam met hulle die bal te gooi en slaan sodat hulle nie die laaste ouens sal wees om vir die skool se bofbalspan gekies te word nie. Een rustige Sondagmiddag lê Gabe en tannie Batty bowwe onder die wasgoeddraad uit om straatbolfbal te speel. Luke hou die kolf vas, Gabe gooi en Jimmy, Becky en tannie Batty dek die drie bowwe. Ek staan by die kombuisdeur en kyk.

“Eliza, kom hier en vang vir ons,” roep Gabe my van die gooier se posisie af. “Ons het jou nodig.”

“Ek ... ek weet nie hoe nie. Ek het nog nooit bofbal gespeel nie.”

“Het jy nog nooit bofbal gespeel nie?” sê Gabe en krap sy kop. “Watter soort skool het jy bygewoon?”

*As hy maar net geweet het, dink ek.*

“Komaan, Ma,” smee Jimmy. “Jy moet ons vanger wees.”

“Nee ... Ek kan regtig nie.”

Gabe stap met lang treë oor die werf en vat my aan die arm. Hy trek my tot waar hulle speel voordat ek verder kan protesteer. “Al wat jy moet doen, is om hier agter die tuisbof te staan en die bal te vang as Luke dit mis slaan. Maar Luke gaan dit nie mis nie, nè, Luke? Hou net jou oog op die bal en swaai die kolf soos ek jou gewys het.”

Hulle maak my gou deel van die pret en gelag. Luke konsentreer so hard terwyl hy vir Gabe wag om die bal te gooi dat die punt van sy tong uitsteek, net soos Winky s'n. Maar die uitdrukking op Luke se gesig toe hy uiteindelik die bal ver oor Gabe se kop slaan, laat my oë vol trane skiet. Tannie Batty spring op en af en juig hom toe terwyl die bal verby haar trek. Winky hardloop in die buiteveld rond en blaf. Hy lyk heeltemal deurmekaar terwyl hy na die bal soek. Becky gee haar boetie 'n drukkies toe hy by die eerste bof verby haar hardloop.

Ons is 'n familie, net soos die een waarvan ek altyd as kind gedroom het, behalwe dat ons nie 'n familie is nie. Gabe is nie die pa nie en tannie Batty sal uiteindelik na haar eie huis toe gaan, en ek sal weereens alleen gelos word. Ek kan nie verstaan waarom God my aanhou tart nie; waarom Hy vir my gee waarvan ek droom net om dit alles weg te ruk nie. My ma was reg. Liefde is soos spookasem. Dit verdwyn die oomblik wanneer jy dit in jou mond proe.

Terwyl die ander Luke toejuig en hom op die rug klop, gaan ek haastig in huis toe om my trane weg te steek. Ek sit by die kombuistafel met my hande

voor my gesig toe ek hoor hoe die skuifdeur agter my oop en toe gaan.

“Eliza?” sê Gabe sag. “Is jy oukei?” Hy sit sy hand op my skouer, maar toe hy voel hoe ek verstyf, vat hy dit vinnig weg. Ek vee my oë met my hande af.

“Ja ... Ek makeer niks.”

“Ek hoop ek het nie iets gedoen om jou te ontstel nie.”

“Dit is nie jy nie, Gabe. Ek sal oukei wees.”

Hy trek die stoel langs myne uit en gaan sit. Vou sy arms voor hom op die tafel. “Ek is soms bekommerd dat wanneer ons sulke dinge saam doen dit te veel herinneringe terugbring ... Dat jy Sam dan meer mis.”

Ek kyk verbaas op na hom. “Nee, dit is glad nie wat dit is nie. Sam het nooit ’n kans gehad om sulke goed saam met my en die kinders te doen nie. Dis net dat – ” Ek bly stil en skud my kop. “Toemaar, dit maak nie saak nie.”

“Eliza, jy kan met my praat as iets jou pla. Jy kan my vertrou – ”

“Kan ek regtig?” vra ek kwaad. “En dan vertrou jy my ook en deel al jou geheime met my?”

Gabe staar na my en ek weet hy voer ’n innerlike stryd. Ek kan dit in sy oë sien. Daar is pyn en ook verlies wat lyk of dit hom dooddruk. Sam se oë het ook so gelyk toe ek hom ontmoet het. Dit lyk egter of Gabe nog meer foltering in sy binneste het as wat Sam gehad het. Ek is dadelik jammer en wil so sê, maar dit is te laat. Gabe stoot stil sy stoel agteruit en loop.



’n Paar dae nadat ons bofbal gespeel het, kom Luke woedend by die huis aan. Ek kan sien hoe hy met Jimmy baklei terwyl hulle in die laning aankom; hulle slaan en stamp mekaar – iets wat hulle byna nooit doen nie.

“Wat makeer julle twee?” roep ek van waar ek buite die skuur saam met Gabe aan die werk is. “Hou op daarmee voordat een van julle seerkry.”

“Hy het dit begin, Ma,” sê Jimmy. “Hy karring nog die hele pad van die skool af aan my.”

Luke swaai sy vuus na Jimmy, maar mis. “H-hou jou mond!”

“Luke, kom hier,” sê ek.

Hy ignoreer my en slaan die kombuisdeur agter hom toe sonder om met my te praat. Ek en Gabe is besig om die perd voor die skoffelploeg uit te span, maar ek is van plan om uit te vind wat aangaan sodra ek hier klaar is. ’n Paar minute later stap ek by die kombuis in net om te hoor hoe Becky huil. Luke storm soos ’n stoomroller by my verby. Al wat ek tussen die snikke deur uit Becky kan kry, is dat Luke iets gedoen het om haar te laat huil. Ek los haar in

tannie Batty se arms en volg Luke na buite.

Toe ek hom nêrens sien nie, gaan soek ek hom in die skuur. Ek hoor hoe Gabe sag met die perde praat terwyl hy vir hulle voer gee en dan sien ek Luke se rooikop toe hy agter 'n hoop hooi induik. Hy sit en huil. Gabe stap vinnig om na die kant van die stal om te sien wie daar is.

“Hei, grootman, wat makeer?” vra Gabe. “Nee, wag 'n bietjie, Luke. Moenie weghardloop nie. Kom hier. Ons is mos vriende, of hoe? Kan jy my nie vertel wat fout is nie?” Luke antwoord nie, maar hy snuif asof hy steeds huil. Nie een van hulle sien my waar ek buite die deur staan en luister nie.

“Daar het vandag iets by die skool gebeur, nè?” sê Gabe. Hy vra nie 'n vraag nie, maar sê dit asof hy weet. “Ek wed jou ek kan raai wat verkeerd is,” gaan hy voort. “Gee my drie raaiskote. As ek jou geheim kan raai, belowe ek dat ek vir jou 'n geheim oor myself sal vertel. Hoe klink dit vir jou?” Ek hoor nie Luke se antwoord nie, maar te oordeel na Gabe se volgende woorde neem ek aan hy het ingestem. “Nou goed, laat ek sien. Ek raai dat 'n spul onnosel grootbekke by die skool jou oor iets geterg het, waarskynlik iets wat jy nie kan verander nie, soos dat jy rooi hare het of nie 'n pa het nie. Hulle geterg het jou so kwaad en omgekrap en deurmekaar laat voel, en voordat jy besef het wat aan die gang was, kom jy huis toe en haal jou gevoelens op almal om jou uit. Is ek reg?”

“Hoe h-het jy geweet?” vra Luke verwonderd.

“Wel, dis waar my geheim inkom. Belowe jy sal vir niemand vertel nie?” Gabe praat so sag dat ek my ore moet spits om hom te hoor. “Toe ek op skool was, het die ander kinders my die hele tyd gespot omdat ek moeilik gepraat het. Dit was of ek net nie die woorde reg kon laat uitkom nie. Ek het in my kop geweet wat ek wou sê, maar my tong het oor die woorde gestruikel asof daar 'n reuseknoop in was.”

“Het jy geh-hakkel net soos ek?”

“Die hele tyd.”

“Regtig, meneer Harper?”

“Op my woord van eer. Maar ek het baie erger as jy gehakkel. Ek kon nie eens een sin klaarmaak nie. Noudat ek groot is, dink ek ek weet hoekom ek so gesukkel het om my woorde uit te kry.”

Gabe bly so lank stil dat ek nie seker is of hy vir Luke gaan vertel of nie. Toe hy uiteindelik praat, klink sy stem anders – sagter, maar terselfdertyd harder ook.

“Ek was bang vir my pa toe ek 'n kind was. Hy het so hard gepraat wanneer hy kwaad was dat ons huis se mure geskud het – en my pa was die hele tyd kwaad, gewoonlik vir my. Hy het baie van my verwag omdat ek sy

oudste seun was, maar dit het gevoel of ek niks reg kon doen nie. My maag was partykeer so op 'n knoop dat ek gedink het ek gaan naar word, en wanneer hy my iets gevra het, het daardie knoop na my tong versprei sodat ek nie kon praat nie. Hoe meer my pa op my geskree het hoe e-erger het dit geword.”

Ek hoor die geweldige emosie in Gabe se stem toe hy oor die woord struikel, en ek weet hy maak nie net 'n storie op om Luke beter te laat voel nie.

“B-belowe j-jy sal vir niemand vertel nie,” sê Luke sag.

“Ek belowe.”

“Ek was b-bang vir my o-oupa.”

My oë skiet vol tranes toe ek dit hoor. Ek onthou hoe Luke vir Oupa Wyatt probeer volg het ná Sam se dood, so honger vir die liefde en aandag wat Sam hom gegee het, maar die ou man kon dit nooit in sy hart vind om enige liefde te wys nie. Die enigste emosie wat hy geweet het hoe om te wys was woede. Hy was vir soveel jare gemeen en haatdraend dat al sy gevoelens op dieselfde manier tot uiting gekom het. As hy dus bekommerd was oor een van die seuns of as hulle hom laat skrik het, het enige besorgdheid wat hy dalk gevoel het in die vorm van woede uit sy mond gekom. As Frank ooit lief was vir sy kinders of kleinkinders, het hy nie geweet hoe om dit vir hulle te sê nie.

“Weet jy wat nog?” vra Luke. Sy stem is so sag dat ek stokstil moet staan, versigtig om nie 'n strooihalm te laat ritsel of 'n vloerplank te kraak sodat ek hom kan hoor nie. “Ek was b-by Oupa ... toe ... hy gev-val het.”

Ek snak na my asem en besef nou eers dat ek nog die hele tyd my asem ophou. Gabe se stem is sag. “Bedoel jy nou die dag toe hy dood is?”

“Ja. Oupa het geval ... en toe kyk hy op na my. Hy het gesê ‘help’ ... maar ek het w-weggehardloop.”

“Omdat jy bang was, Luke?”

“Nee ... Ek was k-kwaad. Oupa wou nie vir Pappa gehelp het toe hy siek was nie. Daarom w-wou ek nie vir Oupa help nie.”

Ek laat sak my kop in my hande en huil sag. God help my, ek sou dalk dieselfde gedoen het as Frank Wyatt my vir hulp gevra het. Dit breek egter my hart om te dink dat Luke al die tyd so 'n swaar las alleen moet dra. Ek staan op die punt om my teenwoordigheid bekend te maak, om te hardloop en Luke vas te hou toe ek Gabe hoor sê: “Kom hier, seun.”

Aan die skuifgeluide en Luke se gedempte snikke lei ek af dat Gabe hom vashou. Ek dink al drie van ons huil, want toe Gabe weer praat, klink dit of sy stem breek.

“Luister, Luke ... en ek wil hê jy moet regtig luister. Elke lieue een van

ons het al goed gedoen wanneer ons kwaad is waaroor ons later jammer is.”

Ek onthou die woedende woorde wat ek vir my pa gesê het en ek onderdruk ’n snik.

“God weet wanneer ons jammer is in ons hart, en Hy vergewe ons. Dan moet ons onself vergewe. Maar luister na my ... Luister jy, Luke? Dit is nie jou skuld dat jou oupa dood is nie. Dit is nie! Selfs al het jy hulp gaan soek die oomblik toe jou oupa geval het, sou dit geen verskil gemaak het nie. Jou mamma het my vertel hy het ’n hartaanval gehad. Daar is niks wat enigiemand vir hom kon doen nie. Verstaan jy dit? Nie jy nie, nie ’n dokter nie ... niemand nie. Jy hoef nie langer sleg te voel daaroor nie.”

Luke begin huil; diep, hartverskeurende snikke wat ek weet op die ou einde vir hom genesing sal bring. Ek draai vinnig om en hardloop weg van die skuur af sodat ek kan rou oor alles wat Luke verloor het. Dit is eers later, nadat ek terug is in die kombuis om tannie Batty met aandete te help, dat ek onthou wat Gabe gesê het – *Ek was my pa se oudste seun*. Net soos Matthew.

“Is Becky oukei?” vra ek vir tannie Batty toe ek ’n groentemes uit die laai haal om te help aartappels skil.

“Ja wat. Ons het ’n bietjie gesels. Het jy dinge met arme klein Luke uitgesorteer?”

“Gabe praat met hom,” sê ek. Toe dink ek aan iets anders. “Tannie Batty, het Matthew gehakkel toe hy ’n seun was?”

Die aartappel wat sy besig is om te skil glip uit haar hand uit en rol oor die tafel. Sy tel dit vinnig op en vat dan sag met haar styselbesmeerde hand aan my arm. “Moet jou nie oor klein Luke bekommer nie. Hy gaan een van die dae sy hakkelry ontgroeï.”

“Net soos Matthew?”

Sy antwoord my nie, konsentreer terwyl sy die skil in een lang, draaiende krul afsny – iets wat ek nog nooit kon regkry nie.

“Matthew se lewe was die ene moeilikheid van die oomblik dat hy verwek is,” sê sy uiteindelik. “Ek het al dikwels gewonder of hy ’n gelukkiger lewe sou gehad het as Lydia hom opgegee het vir aanneming, soos ek wou gehad het sy moes. Ek sou dan natuurlik die een gewees het wat al daardie jare vir Frank Wyatt sou moes verduur het.”

Ek sê nie vir Gabe enigiets tydens aandete nie, maar toe ons klaar geëet en die skottelgoed gewas het, gaan ek uit skuur toe om hom te bedank omdat hy met Luke gepraat het. Die lig brand in die werkswinkel waar Gabe slaap en ek klop aan die deur. Hy antwoord nie. Ek stoot dit oop en loer na binne.

“Gabe?”

Daar is niemand nie. ’n Klein entjie van my af bo-op ’n omgekeerde



appelkrat staan Gabe se tikmasjien. Daar is 'n vel papier in met iets daarop getik. Die papier steek uit, asof hy weggestap het terwyl hy besig was om iets te skryf. My nuuskierigheid kry die oorhand. Ek buk nader om dit te lees:

*My pa is oral. Daar is geen foto's van hom nie, geen pype of tabaksakkies of gunsteling stoele om my aan sy gewoontes of gebare te herinner nie, maar hy is steeds oral. Hy is in die wind wat deur die skuur se oop deur fluit en die stof opwaai wat ek vergeet het om op te vee. Ek hoor sy stem, voel sy berisping in die skewe hoekpaal en in die stuk gereedskap wat ek vergeet het om op die regte plek te bêre.*

*Ek het teruggekom om dinge met hom reg te maak. Ek het teruggekom, want ek het die plaas gemis en in al die jare dat ek weg was, het ek na my huis verlang. Elke landery en skuur waarby ek in Frankryk verbygeleef het, het my geroep om te stop en 'n graaf in die vrugbare grond te steek en die bekende reuk van perde en hooi in te asem. Ek is eenkeer bestraf omdat ek uit die linie gebreek en langs 'n heining gaan staan het om 'n merrie te vryf, maar ek het na die bekende grofheid van haar lyf gesmag. Ek het 'n Franse boer my weeklikse toelaag sigarette aangebied as hy my net sou toelaat om in sy skuur in te gaan en sy enigste koei te melk.*

*Ek het my pa gehaat, maar was lief vir die plaas. Op die ou einde het die liefde swaarder geweeg as die haat en het dit my huis toe gelei. Ek het verlang na die verandering van seisoene in die boord: die strak skoonheid van die kaal takke teen die winterlug; die kantagtige pienk wat in die lente daaroor neerdaal; die vrugte wat in die somer soos swaar juwele aan die bome hang; die blarevlamme wat die bome as 'n herfsoffer verteer. Ek het huis toe gekom om dinge reg te maak; om te sê ek is jammer oor die bitter woorde wat ons voor my weggaan vir mekaar gesê het. Maar dit is te laat. My pa is weg.*

*Tog is hy oral, en ek kan nie hier bly nie.*

*Ek sal my belofte hou en die oes inbring, maar my pa is hier en niks wat ek doen, stel hom tevrede nie. Ek sal nooit gelukkig kan wees op 'n plek waar ek soveel pyn geken het nie ...*

Ek glip by die werkswinkel uit en gaan terug huis toe, sekerder as ooit dat Gabe wel Matthew Wyatt is. Maar wat moet ek daaromtrent doen? Ek is ook lief vir Wyatt-boorde en ek is doodbang dat ek dit sal verloor. Ek is ook doodbang omdat ek verlief is op Gabe en seker is dat ek hom gaan verloor. Het hy dan nie nou net geskryf hy sal nooit hier kan bly nie? Alles lyk so deurmekaar en ek is bang dat ek dit nooit sal kan uitsorteer nie. Ek besluit uiteindelik om nog 'n rukkie te wag en te kyk watter leidrade John Wakefield se brief aan Washington sal oplewer.

Dit is tyd vir ons om die hooi te sny, dit dan met hooivurke op die wa te laai en in die skuur te gaan bêre. Dit is werk wat 'n mens laat warm kry en laat juk. Jimmy en Luke help ons. Die skool het 'n paar weke vroeër gesluit omdat die distrik nie meer geld het om die onderwysers te betaal nie. Ons werk van vroeg tot laat en aan die einde van elke lang, warm dag vat Gabe die seuns af na tannie Batty se dam toe vir 'n swem. Ek sien eenkeer hoe hy sy hemp uittrek terwyl hulle teen die heuwel af stap en sien vlugtig weer daardie aaklige litteken reg bo sy hart.

“Nog net ’n paar weke dan is dit tyd vir die kersieplukkers om te begin kom,” herinner tannie Batty my een oggend nadat ons klaar is met die hooi.

“Tannie is reg. Ons moet die plukkers se kwartiere skoonmaak en die beddegoed was voordat hulle begin opdaag.” Ek het dit elke jaar gedoen terwyl Sam en Frank nog geleef het; ek gaan dus hierdie keer iets doen waarmee ek bekend is.

Ek en tannie Batty is een oggend saam besig om matrasoortreksels vol vars strooi te maak toe ’n ou Ford stotterend in my oprit tot stilstand kom. Ek moes geweet het so ’n antieke kar kan net aan meneer Wakefield behoort. Hy klim uit en groet ons met ’n buiging en ’n lig van sy hoed.

“Goeiemôre, mevrou Wyatt, mevrou Gibson. Hoe gaan dit vanoggend met julle dames?”

“Dit gaan goed met my, John,” antwoord tannie Batty. “Dit is goed om jou weer te sien.” Ek kan aan haar stralende gesig sien as hy vir haar ’n miljoen dollar gegee het, sou dit nie so ’n groot geskenk gewees het as die feit dat hy haar op haar getroude naam aanspreek nie.

“Wil jy inkom vir ’n koppie koffie, meneer Wakefield?” vra ek. Hy het sy aktetas by hom en ek wil graag sit indien hy belangrike nuus het om my mee te deel.

“Ja, graag. As julle nie omgee nie. Ek wil julle dames nie onderbreek nie. Julle lyk taamlik besig ...”

“Gaan jy maar, Toots,” sê tannie Batty. “Ek kan vir ’n rukkie sonder jou klaarkom.”

Ek laat meneer Wakefield by die kombuistafel sit en sit ’n koppie koffie en ’n stukkie van tannie Batty se rabarbertert voor hom neer toe hy sy aktetas oopmaak.

“Ek het hierdie keer goeie nuus, Eliza,” sê hy. “Ek het uiteindelik nuus van Washington ontvang. Hulle het bevestig dat Matthew Wyatt nié in die oorlog dood is nie.”

Ek sak op ’n stoel neer toe dit skielik voel of my knieë onder my gaan meegee. “So ... hy leef nog?”

“Wel, hy het in Desember 1918 nog geleef. Matthew het op die twaalfde van daardie maand in 1918 eervolle ontslag gekry. Hier is ’n afskrif van die inligting op die dokumente van sy ontslag, as jy dit wil lees.”

Ek kyk vlugtig oor die dokument terwyl meneer Wakefield heerlik aan sy tert eet. Matthew het in die infanterie gedien as deel van die American Expeditionary Forces wat in Frankryk gestasioneer was. Die dokumente gee ’n lys van die veldslae en veldtogte waarby hy betrokke was – Cantigny, Belleau Wood, St. Mihiel – en die eretekens wat hy daarvoor ontvang het. Sy

haarkleur word aangegee as bruin, sy oë as bruin en sy lengte en gewig is ook ongeveer dieselfde as Gabe s'n.

“Wat beteken dit?” vra ek. “Dit sê ‘datum van skeiding ... bestemming ... rede vir skeiding’.”

Meneer Wakefield vat vinnig 'n slukkie koffie. Dan sit hy sy koppie neer en verduidelik. “Matthew is in Frankryk in die hospitaal opgeneem vir skrapnelwonde wat hy in die veldslag van St. Mihiel opgedoen het kort voordat die oorlog tot 'n einde gekom het. Hulle het hom terug na die Verenigde State gestuur om te herstel, en dit is die ‘skeiding’ waarvan hulle praat. Hy het sy eervolle ontslag gekry direk nadat hy uit die hospitaal ontslaan is.”

Ek dink weer aan die litteken bokant Gabe se hart en wonder hoe 'n skrapnelwond lyk. “Wat is die volgende stap?” vra ek. “Ons weet hy leef nog, maar hoe gaan ons te werk om hom op te spoor?”

“Ek gaan vir die weermaghospitaal skryf wat hom ontslaan het en vra of hulle dalk 'n adres het. Dit sal dalk weer tyd neem voordat ons 'n antwoord kry – en daar het ook baie tyd verloop vandat hy ontslaan is – maar ek sal jou laat weet sodra ek iets hoor.”

Hy aanvaar gretig nog 'n stukkie tert.

Nadat meneer Wakefield weg is, gaan help ek weer vir tannie Batty. My gesigsuitdrukking wys seker duidelik ek is omgekrap, want die eerste ding wat sy vra, is: “Nog moeilikheid, Toots?”

Ek knik. “Meneer Wakefield het nuus oor Matthew Wyatt gebring. Dit lyk of hy toe nie in die oorlog dood is nie. Matthew leef dalk nog.”

Sy hou op om die sloop met strooi te stop. Sy maak haar oë toe en vreugde en verligting vul haar gesig. “Matthew leef! Dink jou dit in. Ná al hierdie tyd.”

“Ja, en ek moet hom opspoor, tannie Batty. Ek en die kinders is in die moeilikheid.”

“In watter soort moeilikheid kan julle pragtige goedjies dan wees?”

Ek trek my asem diep in en blaker dan alles op een slag uit. “Dit blyk dat ek tog nie die eienaar is van hierdie huis of die plaas nie. Frank Wyatt het in sy testament alles aan Matthew nagelaat.”

“Nee! Ek glo dit nie,” roep sy uit. “Dit moet 'n fout wees.”

Ek gaan sit langs haar. “Dit is nie 'n fout nie. Meneer Wakefield het vir my Frank se testament gewys.”

Tannie Batty skud haar kop vasbeslote. “Frank sou Wyatt-boorde nóóit vir Matthew gegee het nie. Nie in 'n miljoen jaar nie! Nie nadat hy die waarheid uitgevind het nie.”

Ek staar na haar. “Die waarheid? Bedoel Tannie Frank het geweet Matthew is nie sy seun nie?”

“Ja.”

Ek onthou skielik ’n reël uit Gabe se verhaal: *Die nag toe ek uitgevind het dat hy nie my regte pa is nie, het ek weergebore gevoel.* Ek sidder.

“Tannie Batty, het Matthew ook geweet Frank is nie sy regte pa nie?”

“Ja. Hulle albei het uitgevind. Ek was toevallig daar toe dit gebeur het ... ”

# Matthew's Story

*1901*

“And the Angel of the Lord...Touched him, and said,

Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.”

1 KINGS 19:7

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**F**or my sister, Lydia, life with Frank Wyatt was very difficult— and very lonely. Frank had no friends to speak of, and his greed and ruthlessness drove away the last of his family members. The only measure of joy Lydia found in life was in her three sons—especially Matthew, her eldest. I purchased a Gramophone around the time Samuel was born, and Lydia would bring her babies down to my house as often as she could sneak away. I recall so clearly how she would lift little Matthew in her arms as if he was her dancing partner and whirl him around my parlor as the music played, and the two of them would laugh and laugh. But by the time Matthew started school, Frank had crushed the last spark of laughter out of the poor child as thoroughly as a cider press squeezes juice from an apple.

I happened to be up at Lydia's house one night, helping her nurse Samuel and little Willie through a bout of the measles, when I saw for myself how Frank raised his sons. Seven-year-old Matthew had just recovered from the measles, too, and had done his chores that night for the first time in over a week. I don't know if the child was in a hurry or had simply forgotten, as children are apt to do, but Matthew failed to latch the door to the chicken coop for the night. When Frank discovered it, he stormed into the house, bellowing with rage.

"You worthless kid! What's the matter with you? Can't you do anything right? Get up!" He grabbed Matthew by the arm and hauled him out of the kitchen chair where he sat eating his cookies and milk before bed. Frank was such a tall, broad-shouldered man that my stomach lurched at the sight of him clutching his helpless, terrified

son. "I'll teach you not to disobey me, you irresponsible whelp!"

"No, Frank! Listen, please!" Lydia cried, rushing to Matthew's defense.

"Get out of my way," he said, shoving her aside. "If I listened to you, my sons would all end up in hell."

"But he didn't do it on purpose," she pleaded. "He made a simple mistake!"

"You stay out of this!" he warned. "The Bible says, 'Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.' "

He dragged Matthew toward the back door by his spindly arm. Frank paused only to remove his razor strop from its hook above the washstand. Tears sprang to my eyes when I glimpsed the thick, leather belt in Frank's work-hardened hand.

"Frank, don't!" I cried. "He's only a child!"

He turned on me with a look that froze my blood. "Get out of my house! This is none of your affair!" He turned the same withering gaze on Lydia and she backed away from him in fear.

Matthew whimpered pitifully. In his terror, he had wet himself. But he didn't struggle against his father's grasp or scream for help. That's how I knew with horrifying certainty that this wasn't the first time he had been beaten. Only a child who had suffered an even harsher punishment for resisting would have learned not to.

The windows rattled as Frank slammed the kitchen door on his way out. It took me a moment to recover from my shock, then I started after Frank, determined to stop him.

"Betsy, no! Don't!" Lydia cried, holding me back.

"I can't just stand here and let him beat that child."

"Please, you have to...or it'll be much worse." She was trembling from head to toe, and I suddenly realized that I was, too.

"How long has this been going on?" I could barely get the words

out. Lydia closed her eyes and turned her face away from me. I jerked her back. “Lydia, *how long?*”

“It won’t happen again, I swear it won’t. It was my fault because I was distracted with the other two being sick and I didn’t make sure Matthew did everything perfectly. Frank only gets angry when they make a mistake, and I’ll be more careful from now on. I’ll make sure they don’t make any mistakes.”

“*They?*” I asked in horror. “Surely Frank hasn’t...he wouldn’t beat little Sammy? He’s only a baby! What could a five year old possibly do that’s worthy of a beating with a razor strop?” When she didn’t answer me I grabbed her shoulders, shaking her slightly. “Lydia, answer me!”

“Frank says they have to learn to obey him immediately from the time they are very young. And they are learning, Betsy, honest they are. They both try hard now to do what he says right away. This time it was my fault—”

“Lydia, stop it! This is insane! Frank can’t expect perfection from mere children—or even from you, for that matter. You’re leaving him tonight, this very instant—and you’re taking those poor babies with you.”

“I can’t! How are we supposed to live?”

“I have enough money to support all of us. Let me take care of you. Come home with me, please. For your own sake as well as for theirs.”

Lydia gave a harsh laugh. “Do you really think Frank Wyatt will give up his sons that easily, without a fight? Oh, he’ll let me leave him. He no longer needs me now that he has three heirs. But who’s going to protect my boys from their father if I’m not here? Who’s going to make sure they don’t make a mistake?”

“But *he’s* the one who’s mistaken! What Frank is doing isn’t right!”

“No? Well, who’s going to stop him? Who’s going to come between a father and his right to raise his children in his own home as he sees



fit? Frank is a pillar in this community, a pillar in his church. There's nothing I can do except stay here and try to protect my sons as best I can."

"Don't you see what Frank's doing? It's his own sin and guilt that he's trying to purge out of them. Frank can never forgive himself for his 'great sin' with you, and so he's taking it out on you and his sons. You have to leave him, Lydia. You have to get out of here."

"No. I'm staying." Her tears and her trembling had stopped. She was calm suddenly, with that terrible serenity I had once mistaken for inner strength. "This is the life I deserve," she said with eerie detachment. "Frank is the punishment for my sin."

"But it doesn't work that way. God doesn't punish us like that. He forgives us if—"

She laid her ice-cold hand on my arm. "The baby is crying, Betsy. I have to go to him. Frank doesn't like to hear him cry. You'd better leave before Frank comes back."

When I walked down the hill toward home, the night was fearfully still. As much as I'd dreaded hearing the sound of little Matthew being beaten, much worse was the silence of a seven-year-old child who'd already learned not to scream. I wept that night for a long, long time. I'd never felt more helpless in my life.

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"I hate him! He's impossible to please!" Twelve-year-old Matthew threw himself into Walter's wine-colored leather chair with such fury I feared he would break the springs. I didn't say a word. The boy needed to vent his frustration, and my cottage was the only safe place in the world where he could do it. Matthew's stored-up rage had already caused him to start picking fights at school, and then he'd been doubly disciplined—by the principal and later at home. As a result, Matthew had quickly learned to stuff his anger deep inside. I

tried to provide an outlet for him so it wouldn't build to volcanic proportions.

"Tell me all about it," I said, offering him a piece of spice cake and a glass of milk. He set them on the table beside the chair, too overwrought to eat.

"Why is my father so hard on me? I can't do anything right, and Willie—his precious Willie—never does anything wrong! I can't stand living there another minute! I'm running away, Aunt Betty. This time I'm leaving for good and I'm never coming back!"

"I know, Toots. I know how hard it is for you at home, and I don't blame you in the least for wanting to run. But you're only twelve years old. Your father will send the sheriff after you quick as a wink, and then he'll beat the tar out of you for disgracing him."

"What did I ever do to deserve this?" he moaned. "My father can't even stand to look at me. I see it in his eyes every day and I don't know why. He hates the sight of me."

I longed to tell Matthew the truth; that every time Frank looked at him he was reminded of his own sin. But I couldn't explain it to the poor child without exposing his mother's sin as well. I bent over his chair and drew him into my arms. He was stiff with resistance at first, but he eventually melted—as he always did—starved as he was for love.

"You know what, Toots?" I said as he clung to me. "I love you, and your mother loves you, and your heavenly Father loves you—now and always."

Matthew dried his tears on his sleeve, and after a while, he dug into his cake. "Did you make this just for me?" he asked.

"You bet I did. And I have another surprise for you, too. Guess what came in the mail today?"

"A new Herman Walters book?" He almost smiled.

"The latest one. It's called *Danger in the Jungle*. Sounds exciting,

doesn't it?"

He was soon absorbed in the book, thousands of miles away from his father. I loved watching him read, slumped in Walter's chair with one of his lanky legs sprawled over the arm of it. I wrote nearly every book in that series for Matthew, so he would have an escape from his sorrowful life. If only for a few hours.

"Can I take this book home with me?" he asked when it was time for him to go do his chores.

"You'd better not. You know what'll happen if your father catches you with it."

"But why, Aunt Betty? What does he have against books?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Toots," I said, reaching up to smooth his dark hair off his forehead. He already stood several inches taller than me. "But you know you're welcome to come down here and read anytime you want."

In the years that followed, Samuel would also read every single book in the series. But he never did confide in me or accept my consolation the way Matthew did. Sam was as skittish as a wild rabbit, the result of growing up in constant fear. H. G. Wells once wrote a book called *The Invisible Man*, and that's the best way to describe poor Sam—he tried his best to be invisible, to disappear into the background where he could never get into trouble. He couldn't live up to his father's standards of perfection any better than the rest of us could, so his only defense was to slide through life as silently and invisibly as possible.

But what broke my heart more than anything else was the fact that no matter how many times Frank beat those boys, no matter how many times he withdrew his love and approval as punishment, his sons still strove with all their might to please him. Willie had somehow managed to earn his approbation—Matthew and Samuel saw the nods of acceptance he received, and it created false hopes in

them that they might one day receive such looks as well. It also created in them an intense hatred for their father's favorite son.

Frank Wyatt claimed to know the Bible and quoted it all the time, but he had somehow overlooked the tragic story of Jacob's favoritism toward his son Joseph and the murderous jealousy that resulted in Joseph's brothers. What happened to little Willie was Frank's fault as surely as if he had drowned the child in the pond with his own two hands.

The image of Willie's blanched, lifeless body being dragged from the icy water is one that I have never been able to erase from my memory. Worse was the fact that Frank made Matthew and Samuel stand shivering in the muddy snow at the edge of the pond and watch the sheriff and his deputies haul the corpse into their boat. They saw their brother's frozen, staring eyes, his silenced scream. That's the only reason I stayed there on that dreadful day. Lord knows, no one else would offer those boys an ounce of comfort.

Willie's death changed everyone and became the great dividing line between the way things had always been and the way things would forever be. Matthew never forgave himself for allowing his brother to step out onto that ice. In the years that followed he endured unending verbal and physical abuse, but he accepted his father's beatings and wrath as the punishment he justly deserved. Sam blamed himself for disappearing and not being there to help either of his brothers. His self-imposed penalty was to stick close to Matthew from now on, enduring Frank's tirades along with him. If either of the boys had ever dreamed of leaving Wyatt Orchards to escape their father once they grew up, they no longer considered it an option. The orchard became their prison cell, Frank their jailer, a life sentence their punishment for murder.

Lydia never got over the loss of her youngest child, either. She withdrew almost completely from the reality of the world around her,

battling bouts of deep depression. I understood her grief, having lost my beloved Walter, but while I accepted God's consolation and yielded to His will for my life, Lydia accepted her suffering as God's wrath. Frank Wyatt put that notion into her head.

No one could console Frank after the death of his favorite son, and he expressed his grief through the only emotion he knew how to show—anger. After the last of the mourners had gone home on the afternoon of Willie's funeral, he turned on Lydia with unimaginable rage. I had walked up to their farmhouse to tell Lydia that Matthew and Samuel were down at my cottage and to ask if the boys could spend the night with me. That's how I overheard Frank ranting.

"Now look what you've done, you slut! This is God's judgment for our sin! The son of David and Bathsheba died for their adultery and now my son has died for ours!"

I had silently entered through the kitchen door and heard Frank's shouts coming from the parlor. I hurried inside, terrified that he might beat my sister, yet knowing that I was helpless to stop him if he did. I heard the sound of glass shattering and froze in the doorway at the sight of Lydia huddled on the floor, while Frank pelted her with her favorite china knickknacks as if stoning her for adultery.

"God says, 'Vengeance is mine! I will repay!' " Frank yelled, "and I have paid dearly for my one moment of weakness with you! The devil used you to bring me down, Lydia! I should have seen your harlotry for what it was and rebuked you the first time you tempted me!"

He picked up a porcelain teacup I had bought for her, decorated with violets, her favorite flower, and he hurled it with such force it shattered into dust in front of her. Lydia's hands bled from tiny cuts as she tried to scoop the fragments of her treasures together again. Frank smashed the matching saucer next.

"The child of David and Bathsheba's sin is the one who died!" he shouted. "But that would be too small a price for us to pay! God

demands justice, and my punishment is that the innocent son had to die! Now I'll have to look at our bastard every day for the rest of my life—to see the fruit of our sin, in the flesh!”

Frank scooped up a framed studio portrait of Lydia and the three boys, taken two or three years earlier, and flung it to the floor. He stomped it with the heel of his shoe until the frame, the glass, and the photograph were pulverized. I still hadn't moved from the doorway, paralyzed by Frank's violence. Frank never even saw me as he swept from the room, blinded by rage, and ran up the stairs, his shoes crunching on the broken glass that littered the carpet.

I crept into the room and whispered my sister's name. “Lydia...Lydia, come with me, honey, I'm taking you home now.”

She didn't move, didn't look up. Nor did she weep. Her beautiful, haunted eyes stared, unseeing, at the carpet. Only her hands had life in them as they idly fingered the broken shards of her keepsakes.

I crouched carefully in front of her, lifting her chin until she faced me. “Lydia? Honey, listen to me. Frank's wrong. Everything he said just now is wrong. God didn't take Willie's life in order to punish you. It was an accident...a terrible, tragic accident. That's all.”

Lydia gave no sign that she had heard me. She stared as if looking straight through me. I wrapped my arms around her and tried hugging her, but she still didn't respond. Finally I stood and tried pulling her to her feet. She was a dead, lifeless weight.

“Lydia, please...come home with me. The boys are already there, and none of you will ever have to return to this horrible house again. You don't need to stay with Frank any longer. You've paid your debt, Lydia...you've more than paid it. Please let me help you.”

Her lifeless eyes finally met mine. “You want to help me,” she said in a flat, hoarse voice, “then go home. Leave me alone.”

“I'm not leaving unless you come with me,” I said, taking her bleeding hands gently in mine. She yanked them free.

“No. Go home and take care of my boys. That’s how you can help me.”

I felt torn. I wanted my sister out of this house, away from her monster of a husband, but I also didn’t want to leave young Matthew alone for too long. He suffered under an even greater burden of guilt than Frank or Lydia did, believing that Willie’s death was his fault, and I worried that he might try to harm himself. I pleaded with Lydia in vain until we both heard the sound of Frank’s footsteps upstairs. He had probably changed from his good suit into his work clothes and he would be thundering down the stairs again at any moment. Terror filled Lydia’s eyes.

“Leave!” she begged. “Keep Matthew out of his sight!”

I did leave, but I watched from a distance until Frank also left the house and went out to the barn. I needed to be sure that he wouldn’t harm my sister. I needn’t have worried. She told me later that after they laid Willie in his grave Frank never touched her again—not even so much as the brush of his hand on hers. They occupied the same house, slept in the same room, the same bed, but lived thousands of miles apart.

When Lydia finally emerged from her shock, the depression lifted temporarily. She was still a beautiful woman, though deeply troubled. She was also starved for love and affection. About a year after Willie died she began traveling to the city by train on the pretense of seeing a doctor for “female troubles.” But she later confided in me that she was having an illicit love affair—the first of many that followed. I watched helplessly as she tried to bury her pain by becoming the very thing Frank accused her of being. Yet how could I condemn her? Who knows what I might have become if I had been the unfortunate woman to have married Frank Wyatt?

To the outside world Wyatt Orchards must have seemed like the Garden of Eden. The trees flourished, the land prospered, and Frank

became one of the wealthiest fruit growers in the county. He purchased the latest in modern farm machinery, experimented with new grafting procedures, hired extra farm laborers in addition to his two sturdy sons, and even employed domestic help for his wife. Proud of all he had built, he began the tradition of hosting an annual fall open house so that everyone in the county would see and envy his realm. And envy him they did.

One of the saddest ironies of the whole tragedy was that Matthew was a natural-born farmer. Frank couldn't have asked for a more perfect son—one so in love with the land, so in tune with the rhythms of the seasons and with the animals and the trees under his care. Yet Frank remained totally blind to the great gift God had given him.

At twenty-one, Matthew had become a handsome man, pursued by nearly every eligible girl in Deer Springs. He'd inherited Lydia's haunting beauty in a masculine form, with her dark, hypnotic eyes and alluring smile. And if his natural father, Ted Bartlett, had possessed half the charm Matthew did, it was little wonder that Lydia had fallen so hard for him. All the girls in Deer Springs flocked to the open house in droves each fall, hoping to catch the eye of Wyatt Orchards' crown prince. With each passing year, Matthew's love for Wyatt Orchards grew stronger—and his hatred for his father grew stronger as well. The two rival emotions simply could not coexist in Matthew's heart indefinitely.

The open house of 1916 set the final disaster into motion. The day had been a huge success, with hundreds of people paying homage to Frank's accomplishments. Lydia had set up serving tables in the backyard for food and cider, and once the festivities ended and the last few stragglers had gone home, I helped her clean up. Suddenly we heard a terrible uproar coming from the barn, with Frank hollering and Matthew shouting. We couldn't imagine what had provoked such a clamor. We dropped everything and ran inside.



One of the Peterson girls cowered in a corner of the barn by a mound of hay, and Matthew stood with his back to her, protecting her and defending himself from his father at the same time. Frank had a buggy whip in his hand and threatened to lash out at both of them with it.

“Don’t you dare stand there and deny it!” Frank roared. “I caught you in the act!”

“We weren’t doing anything! Just kissing, nothing more!” Matthew stood his ground, holding his father at bay with his hands outstretched. When he signaled over his shoulder for the girl to escape, she ran from the barn, weeping with fright.

Frank took advantage of the distraction to charge forward, scourging Matthew with the whip. “I’ll teach you not to carry on your lewd acts! Maybe this will drive the lust out of you!”

At first Matthew simply held his arms above his face, defending himself from the onslaught as he backed toward the hay mound. But as the whip cracked across his forearms, his hands, and his scalp, leaving savage welts, something inside Matthew finally snapped. Years of stored-up rage suddenly exploded. He lunged at his father and wrestled the whip from his hand, throwing it to the ground. Then Matthew turned on Frank with murder in his eyes.

“I swear before God that I’ll kill you before you’ll ever lay another hand on me!” He sank his fist into Frank’s gut, and before the older man could recover, Matthew began pummeling him, raining blows on him until Frank staggered backward against the wall. Matthew kept after him, beating him relentlessly. Lydia and I watched helplessly, screaming in vain for him to stop, unable to get close enough to intervene without risking injury ourselves.

Frank tried fighting back at first, landing a few blows to Matthew’s jaw, but the boy wrapped his hands around Frank’s throat and wrestled him to the ground, choking the life from him. Frank’s eyes

bulged and his face turned red, then blue, as Matthew straddled him, pounding his head against the floor. I believe Matthew would have killed him then and there if Sam hadn't rushed into the barn just in time. He grabbed his brother from behind, breaking his grip, and pulled him off their father.

But rage still fueled Matthew's strength. He wouldn't quit. He tossed his brother backward into the hay, then scooped up the buggy whip and lashed Frank mercilessly with it, just as Frank had scourged him.

"You sorry excuse for a man!" Matthew shouted. "This is for all the years you tortured me with your cursed strap! How does it feel to be helpless? How does it feel? I was a child! I couldn't defend myself against you back then, but I swear you'll pay for everything you did to me all those years!"

The whip shredded Frank's shirt into rags and sliced his face and arms with bloody gashes as he tried to defend himself. Again, Sam came up from behind and seized his brother.

"Stop it, Matthew! Stop it! Don't kill him! He isn't worth hanging for!"

"I'd rather hang than grow up to be like him! I hate you!" he cried as he spit in Frank's face. Matthew wrestled to free himself from Sam's grip so he could finish Frank off. "I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to kill you! How many times I've wished to God you weren't my father!"

"He isn't!" Lydia screamed. "He isn't your real father, Matthew! You won't ever be like him because Frank isn't your real father!" She was desperate to stop Matthew from killing him.

Her words finally penetrated Matthew's murderous rage. He stopped struggling long enough for Sam to wrest the whip from him. Sam shoved him backward into the hay, away from Frank, then planted himself between the two men, pleading with Matthew as tears streamed down his face.

“Don’t kill him, Matt,” he begged. “I hate his guts as much as you do, but I don’t want you to hang for giving him what he deserves.”

Matthew turned to his mother, his chest heaving. His handsome face twisted with the force of his hatred. “Is it true? What you just said?”

“It’s true,” she wept. “I should have told you the truth years ago. Frank isn’t your father. I deceived him because I was already pregnant with you and your real father was married to someone else.”

“My *real* father?” he murmured. “You mean this worthless piece of...*dirt* is no relation to me?” He swung his boot at Frank, kicking straw and manure on top of him. Frank lay prone, breathless and bleeding, unable to raise himself with a broken wrist and three cracked ribs.

“He’s no relation, Matthew,” Lydia said soothingly. “Leave him be. You’ve paid him back enough, already.”

Matthew looked like a man who has suddenly awakened to find that his long nightmare was simply a dream. He laughed out loud. “You mean—you mean there’s not one drop of his stinking blood in my veins?”

“No, Matthew. Not one drop. You’ll never be like him. You couldn’t be.”

But then his smile faded as the full meaning of what his mother had done also sank in. He shook his head in bewilderment, a wounded child who has been cruelly betrayed. “But...but if he isn’t my father, then *why*? Why did you let him beat me all those years when he had no right to? I thought you loved me....”

Lydia swayed when she realized what she had just done. “I do love you, Matthew...I do,” she cried. “But a fatherless child would have nothing, he would be nothing. I wanted the very best for you. I wanted you to have all of this.”

“So...so you let him beat me? You thought *that* was best for me?”

I saw what was happening and I quickly wrapped my arms around Lydia to hold her up. I was terrified for her—and for Matthew. She had confessed the truth to save her son, to prevent him from committing murder, but she had lost him all the same. I had to get Matthew away from both his parents so I could reason with him.

“Come with me, Matthew, come in the house with me,” I said, releasing Lydia and gently taking his arm. “You’re bleeding. I’ll fix your cuts.”

“Not my house!” Frank wheezed. My heart froze at the hatred in his voice. “That boy will never step one foot in my house again!” Frank winced in pain as he propped himself up with his uninjured arm. His eyes met Lydia’s and stabbed through her. “What you did...lying to me all these years...Is unforgivable! You thought you could steal my orchard from me? Well, your son will never own so much as a clod of dirt from my land! I’ll see John Wakefield tomorrow morning and I’ll write your bastard out of my will! Now get him out of my sight and off my land...Tonight! I don’t ever want to see his face again!”

I quickly hustled Matthew out of the barn while he was too numb to resist. Lydia followed and so did Sam, but I turned to Sam as we reached the door and stopped him. “Go back and help your father,” I told him.

He shook his head. “No. I hate him, too!”

“I know, Sam. But you’re all he has left. He’ll treat you differently from now on, you’ll see.”

“I don’t care! I want to go away with Matthew!”

“You can’t, son,” I said gently. “Your father needs you. Drive him into town now. Tell the doctor...Tell him Frank got trampled by one of the horses...Tell him the reins lashed him.” Sam reluctantly did as he was told.

I built a fire as soon as Lydia, Matthew, and I reached my house. All three of us were shivering. I made a pot of coffee and urged Matthew

to sit down and drink some, to let me wash his cuts, to eat something, but he paced the floor as shock and hatred pumped through his veins.

“Please don’t hate me,” Lydia begged. “Please, Matthew!” He wouldn’t look at her.

“I’m leaving here,” he said, raking his fingers through his hair. “I’ve got to get out of here tonight.”

“Now wait a minute, Toots,” I soothed. “You need to think this through. Don’t go off half-cocked without any plans and no money in your pockets. You can stay here with me for a while.”

“I do have plans. I’m going to enlist in the army. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time now.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” I said. “It’s only a matter of time before the United States gets pulled into that awful war that’s going on over in Europe, and if you enlist now you’ll be one of the first ones sent over there. You don’t want to die that badly, do you?”

He didn’t answer, but as I watched him pace, I wondered if maybe enlisting in the army was the best solution. Matthew had stored up a lifetime of rage, and maybe the battlefield was the best place to vent it. Maybe then he would come back to us emptied of hate.

“I need my clothes and things,” he finally said, stopping in front of me. “Will you go get them for me, Aunt Betty?”

I sighed in resignation. “I’ll go see if Sam and your fa—if Sam took Frank into town to see the doctor yet. Once they’re gone you can gather your things yourself.”

And that’s what he did. Lydia and I cried as hard as we had at Willie’s funeral as we watched him stuff his belongings into a worn satchel. His leaving was another death in our family, another loss. When he kissed us good-bye, we both wondered if we’d ever see him again.

“Promise you’ll write to me, Toots,” I said as I pushed a Bible and two twenty-dollar bills into his hand. “Let us know where you are and

if you're all right."

"Please forgive me, Matthew," Lydia said as she clung to him for the last time. "I lied because I love you! I didn't want to lose you!"

He simply nodded, unable to speak. Then Matthew freed himself from her grasp and left us.

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I tried to convince Lydia to divorce Frank. She refused. "I deserve whatever he does to me," she insisted. "I lied to him."

Surprisingly, Frank didn't publicly expose her shame and kick her out. At first I wondered why, but then I realized that Frank didn't want the outside world to know that his little kingdom had flaws. The scandal of a divorce would taint Wyatt Orchards' name and injure Frank's reputation. Much better to hide their dirty little secret and pretend that nothing was wrong inside the big white house on the hill. Matthew had simply gone off to do his patriotic duty, that's all.

More than a year passed before we heard a single word from Matthew. Then in early March of 1918, he sent a letter to Lydia in care of my address. He wrote from somewhere in France to say that he had forgiven his mother. The war had changed him, he said. It had shown him the destructive power of unchecked hatred. He was tired of killing. Tired of all the desolation. He wanted to feel the rich soil beneath his fingers again, to nurture life and tend things and watch them grow. He wanted to come home but he knew that he never could. Wyatt Orchards was no longer his home. It would belong to Sam someday—Frank Wyatt's real son.

"Did Frank have his will changed to Sam's name?" I asked Lydia after she showed me Matthew's letter.

"Of course," she replied. "As banged up and sore as he was, he rode into town to see his lawyer first thing in the morning. I found the old will crumpled up in the garbage the day after Matthew left."

An eerie stillness began creeping over Lydia then, like a killing frost. As she stared into space, my sister began slipping away from me. I struggled to find a way to pull her back.

“Listen, Lydia, why don’t we write a letter to Matthew right now. I have some money saved up and I’ll be glad to loan it to him. He can buy his own farm and settle down somewhere— maybe he can even find a place nearby that’s for sale, and we can visit him. I’ll ask John Wakefield to keep his eye open for a nice piece of land, okay?”

Lydia nodded and finished her coffee, but she didn’t write the letter. I watched her put on her coat and walk up the hill to her house, and I wondered if she’d even heard a word I’d said.

That night I was down in my cottage typing a manuscript when my front door suddenly opened and Lydia walked in. She wore no coat or boots even though a light dusting of snow covered the ground. She floated across the room toward me as if sleepwalking, her eyes wide open, staring at me, through me. Her hands looked darker than her arms, and I thought at first that she wore gloves. But as she handed me the letter she had received from Matthew that morning I saw crimson fingerprints on the envelope and realized that Lydia’s hands were covered with blood. Dark streaks of it stained the front of her calico dress and apron.

“Lydia, what’s wrong? You’re bleeding! Where are you hurt?” I grabbed her hands, thinking she might have slit her wrists, but I couldn’t find any wounds.

“Write to Matthew for me,” she said. “Tell him he can come home now. Tell him I fixed everything for him.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about? Lydia, sit down and let me see where all this blood is coming from.”

“It isn’t mine,” she said, smiling slightly. “It’s his.”

“Whose?” She didn’t answer. I’d never seen her this far removed from reality before. I gripped her shoulders, terrified for her. “Lydia,

tell me what you've done!"

"I killed Frank."

I released her, backing away. "No...Oh, please, no!"

I left her standing in the living room of my cottage and raced up the hill in the dark. As much as I hated Frank Wyatt, I didn't want my sister to hang for his murder.

"Frank!" I yelled as I banged their kitchen door open. "Frank, where are you?" I tore through the house, calling his name, until I found him curled in a pool of blood on the floor of his study. I knelt beside him. He turned his head and looked at me, his eyes filled with horror, his mouth working soundlessly. He was still alive!

A bloody butcher knife lay on the floor beside him. He clutched his gut with both hands as the blood poured out of him. I ran to the kitchen and grabbed some towels, then knelt beside him again and wadded them into the wound in his stomach. He moaned as I pressed hard to stem the bleeding. His eyes rolled back.

"No, don't black out on me, Frank! Stay awake! Stay with me!" I looked around the room for something to splash on his face to revive him, but the coffee cup on his desk was empty. I slapped his cheeks until his eyes opened again. "Where's Sam? Frank, I need Sam to go get help! Where is he?"

He mouthed the word "barn."

"Hold this tight against the wound Frank, and don't black out on me! I'll be right back!"

I found Sam in the barn with the horses. His eyes went wide when he saw the wild look on my face, the blood all over my hands and dress.

"Your father's been hurt. He needs a doctor. Get into town as fast as you can and bring Dr. Gilbert back with you!"

Sam leaped onto the horse's back without bothering to saddle him, and raced off into the night. By the time I heard the doctor's carriage



outside I had a blanket over Frank and I'd managed to slow his bleeding. He was still conscious, though he hadn't spoken. His eyes followed my movements as I picked the bloody knife off the floor and hid it in his desk drawer. Moments later the doctor walked into the room, shrugging off his coat.

"What happened here, Betty? How is he?" I didn't answer as I moved aside to let Dr. Gilbert examine him. "You kept him from going into shock...That's good. This looks like a pretty nasty stab wound, though. What happened?"

"I don't know," I said calmly. "Lydia came down to my house and told me he'd had an accident. I sent Sam for help and tried to stop the bleeding."

"You had an accident, Frank?"

I saw him hesitate for just a moment, then nod.

"I could use some boiling water, Betty, and as many towels as you can spare. What happened, Frank?" I heard the doctor ask again as I left to fetch them. "Can you tell me what happened?" I didn't hear Frank's answer.

"Where's Lydia?" Dr. Gilbert asked when I returned to the study a few minutes later. "I need to find out what caused this wound so I know what I'm looking at."

I remembered Lydia's strange, disquieting state and I was suddenly afraid for her. "I...I don't know. I left her at my cottage. I'll go find her."

I raced down the hill again, wondering how I could have been so stupid. I'd left Lydia alone!

My cottage door stood open but Lydia was gone. I wandered around in the dark for several minutes, calling her name, shivering with cold and fear before I thought of grabbing a light and looking for her footprints in the fresh snow. I followed them across the yard toward the pond with dread clutching my heart.

Her trail led out onto the thin ice, out to the black, gaping hole  
Lydia had fallen through. Only her apron floated on the inky surface.

I sank down in the soft snow at the edge of the pond and wept.

# DEEL VI

## Matthew se verhaal

*1901*

Die engel het aan Elia geskud en gesê: “Word wakker! Eet! Anders sal die pad vir jou te lank word.”

1 Konings 19:7

## ~ Hoofstuk dertien ~

Vir my suster, Lydia, was die lewe saam met Frank Wyatt baie moeilik – en baie eensaam. Frank het hoegenaamd geen vriende gehad nie en sy gierigheid en genadeloosheid het die laaste van sy familieleden weggedryf. Die enigste vreugde wat Lydia in die lewe gevind het, was haar drie seuns, veral Matthew, haar oudste. Rondom die tyd toe Samuel gebore is, het ek 'n grammofoon gekoop en Lydia het haar babas na my huis toe gebring so dikwels as wat sy kon wegglip. Ek onthou nog duidelik hoe sy klein Matthew in haar arms opgetel het asof hy haar dansmaat is en dan sou sy in my voorkamer rondbeweeg terwyl die musiek speel, en die twee van hulle sou lag en lag. Toe Matthew egter begin skool toe gaan, het Frank die laaste bietjie lag net so deeglik uit daardie arme kind gepars as wat 'n appelpers die sap uit 'n appel druk.

Ek is toevallig een aand by Lydia se huis besig om haar te help om vir Samuel en klein Willie te versorg omdat hulle masels het toe ek met my eie oë sien hoe Frank sy seuns grootmaak. Die sewejarige Matthew was pas gesond nadat hy ook masels gehad het en het daardie dag vir die eerste keer in meer as 'n week sy werkies gedoen. Ek weet nie of die kind haastig was of maar net vergeet het, soos kinders geneig is om te doen nie, maar Matthew het nie die hoenderhok se hek vir die nag toegemaak nie. Toe Frank dit ontdek, storm hy by die huis in en skree van woede.

“Jou nikswerd kind! Wat is fout met jou? Kan jy dan niks reg doen nie? Staan op!” Hy gryp Matthew aan die arm en pluk hom van die kombuisstoel af waar hy met sy melk en koekies sit voordat hy sou gaan slaap. Frank is so 'n lang, breed geskouerde man dat my maag op 'n knop draai toe ek sien hoe hy sy hulpelose, angsbevange seun vasgryp. “Ek sal jou leer om nie ongehoorsaam te wees aan my nie, jou onverantwoordelike niksnut.”

“Nee, Frank! Luister, asseblief,” roep Lydia uit en gaan nader om Matthew te help.

“Gee pad voor my,” sê hy en stamp haar eenkant toe. “As ek na jou moet luister, sal al my seuns in die hel beland.”

“Hy het dit tog nie aspris gedoen nie,” smeek sy. “Hy het net 'n fout gemaak.”

“Hou jou hier uit,” waarsku hy. “Die Bybel sê: ‘As die sotheid vassit in die hart van die seun, die tugroede sal dit daaruit verwyder.’”

Hy sleep Matthew aan sy skraal arm na die agterdeur. Frank steek net lank genoeg vas om sy skeerriem van die hakie bokant die wastafel af te haal. My oë skiet vol trane toe ek die dik leerbelt in Frank se growwe hand sien.

“Frank, moenie!” roep ek uit. “Hy is net ’n kind.”

Hy kyk na my en die uitdrukking in sy oë laat my bloed vries. “Gee pad uit my huis uit! Dit het niks met jou te doen nie!” Hy kyk met dieselfde uitdrukking na Lydia en sy gee uit vrees voor hom pad.

Matthew huil jammerlik. In sy vrees het hy sy broek natgemaak. Tog stoei hy nie teen sy pa se greep of roep om hulp nie. Dit is hoe ek met aaklige sekerheid weet dit is nie die eerste keer dat hy geslaan word nie. Slegs ’n kind wat weet dat hy nog erger gestraf sal word indien hy hom teësit, sou geleer het om dit nie te doen nie.

Die vensters ratel toe Frank die agterdeur op pad na buite toeslaan. Dit neem my ’n oomblik om van my skok te herstel, maar dan sit ek Frank agterna, vasbeslote om hom te keer.

“Betsy, nee! Moenie,” roep Lydia uit en hou my vas.

“Ek kan nie net hier staan en toelaat dat hy daardie kind so slaan nie.”

“Asseblief, jy moet ... anders sal dit baie erger wees.” Sy bewe van kop tot toon, en ek besef skielik dat ek ook bewe.

“Hoe lank is dit al aan die gang?” Ek kan skaars die woorde uitkry. Lydia maak haar oë toe en draai haar gesig van my af weg. Ek draai dit terug. “Lydia, hóé lánk?”

“Dit sal nie weer gebeur nie. Ek belowe, dit sal nie. Dit is my skuld, want my aandag is by die ander twee wat siek is en ek kon nie seker maak dat Matthew alles perfek doen nie. Frank word net kwaad wanneer hulle ’n fout maak, en ek sal van nou af versigtiger wees. Ek sal seker maak hulle maak nie weer foute nie.”

“Hulle?” vra ek ontsteld. “Frank sal tog sekerlik ... Hy sal tog nie vir klein Sammy slaan nie? Hy is nog ’n baba. Wat op aarde kan ’n vyfjarige doen wat ’n pak slae met ’n skeerriem regverdig?” Toe sy my nie antwoord nie, gryp ek haar aan die skouers en skud haar liggies. “Lydia, antwoord my.”

“Frank sê hulle moet van kleins af leer om gehoorsaam te wees aan hom. En hulle leer dit, Betsy, hulle leer dit regtig. Hulle albei probeer nou baie hard om dadelik te doen wat hy sê. Hierdie keer was dit my skuld – ”

“Lydia, stop dit. Dit is malligheid. Frank kan tog nie volmaaktheid verwag van sulke jong kinders nie, en ook nie eens van jou nie. Jy los hom vanaand, sommer nou dadelik – en jy bring hierdie arme kinders saam met jou.”

“Ek kan nie. Hoe sal ons aan die lewe bly?”

“Ek het genoeg geld om ons almal te onderhou. Laat ek vir julle sorg. Kom

saam met my huis toe, asseblief? Ter wille van jouself en jou kinders.”

Lydia lag hard. “Dink jy regtig Frank Wyatt sal sy seuns so maklik prysgee? O ja, hy sal my toelaat om hom te los. Hy het my nie meer nodig noudat hy drie erfgename het nie. Maar wie gaan die seuns teen hulle pa beskerm as ek nie hier is nie? Wie gaan seker maak hulle maak nie ’n fout nie?”

“Maar hy is die een wat verkeerd is. Dit wat Frank doen, is nie reg nie.”

“Nie? Wel, wie gaan hom keer? Wie gaan tussen ’n pa en sy reg kom om sy seuns in sy eie huis groot te maak soos hy dit goeddink? Frank is ’n gesiene man in die gemeenskap, ’n steunpilaar in sy kerk. Daar is niks anders wat ek kan doen as om hier te bly en my seuns na die beste van my vermoë te beskerm nie.”

“Kan jy dan nie sien wat Frank doen nie? Dit is sy eie sonde en skuldgevoelens wat hy uit hulle probeer slaan. Frank kon homself nog nooit vergewe vir sy ‘groot sonde’ met jou nie; daarom haal hy dit op jou en die seuns uit. Jy moet hom los, Lydia. Jy moet hier wegkom.”

“Nee. Ek bly.” Sy het ophou bewe en haar trane is weg. Sy is skielik kalm met daardie aaklige bedaardheid wat ek al voorheen vir innerlike krag aangesien het. “Frank is die straf vir my sonde.”

“Dit is nie hoe dit werk nie. Dit is nie hoe God ons straf nie. Hy vergewe ons as –”

Sy vat met haar yskoue hand aan my arm. “Die baba huil, Betsy. Ek moet na hom toe gaan. Frank hou nie daarvan om hom te hoor huil nie. Jy moet liewer gaan voordat Frank terugkom.”

Toe ek teen die heuwel af terugstap huis toe is die nag angswekkend stil. Al ys ek om die geluid te hoor van klein Matthew wat geslaan word, is die stilte van ’n sewejarige wat reeds geleer het om nie te skree nie vir my baie erger. Ek huil daardie nag onophoudelik. Ek het nog nooit in my lewe meer hulpeloos gevoel nie.

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“Ek haat hom! Dit is onmoontlik om hom tevrede te stel.” Die twaalfjarige Matthew val met soveel woede op Walter se wynkleurige leerstoel neer dat ek bang is hy gaan die vere breek. Ek sê nie ’n woord nie. Die seun moet van sy frustrasie ontslae raak en my kothuis is die enigste veilige plek in die wêreld waar hy dit kan doen. Matthew se opgekropte woede veroorsaak reeds dat hy by die skool in gevegte betrokke raak en dan word hy twee keer gedissiplineer

– deur die skoolhoof en later weer by die huis. As gevolg daarvan het Matthew vinnig geleer om sy woede op te krop. Ek probeer vir hom ’n uitlaat gee sodat dit nie opbou totdat dit later soos ’n vulkaan uitbars nie.

“Vertel my daarvan,” sê ek terwyl ek vir hom ’n stukkie speserykoek en ’n glas melk aangee. Hy sit dit op die tafel langs die stoel neer, te ontsteld om te eet.

“Hoekom is my pa so streng met my? Ek kan niks reg doen nie en Willie – sy kosbare Willie – doen nooit enigiets verkeerd nie. Ek kan nie nog ’n minuut langer daar bly nie. Ek gaan wegloop, tannie Betty. Hierdie keer kom ek nooit weer terug nie.”

“Ek weet, Toots. Ek weet hoe moeilik dit vir jou by die huis is en ek blameer jou glad nie dat jy wil wegloop nie. Maar jy is net twaalf jaar oud. Jou pa sal die sheriff blitsvinnig agter jou aan stuur en dan sal hy jou velle aftrek omdat jy hom in die skande gesteek het.”

“Wat het ek gedoen om dit te verdien?” kla hy. “My pa kan nie eens vir my kyk nie. Ek sien dit elke dag in sy oë en ek weet nie hoekom nie. Hy haat my.”

Ek wil so graag vir Matthew die waarheid vertel; elke keer wanneer Frank na hom kyk, herinner dit hom aan sy eie sonde. Ek kan dit egter nie aan die arme kind verduidelik sonder om ook sy ma se sonde te onthul nie. Ek buk oor sy stoel en druk hom teen my vas. Hy probeer hom eers teësit, maar hy ontspan uiteindelik – soos altyd – aangesien hy so uitgehonger is vir liefde.

“Weet jy wat, Toots?” sê ek terwyl hy aan my vasklou. “Ek is lief vir jou, en jou ma is lief vir jou, en jou hemelse Vader is lief vir jou – nou en vir altyd.”

Matthew vee sy trane met sy mou af en ná ’n rukkie eet hy sy stuk koek. “Het Tannie dit spesiaal vir my gemaak?” vra hy.

“Natuurlik het ek. Ek het vir jou nog ’n ander verrassing ook. Raai wat het vandag in die pos gekom?”

“’n Nuwe Herman Walters-boek?” Hy glimlag amper.

“Die nuutste een. Die titel is *Danger in the Jungle*. Klink opwindend, nè?”

Hy is gou vasgevang in die boek, ver van sy pa af. Ek hou daarvan om te kyk hoe hy lees. Hy sit diep in Walter se stoel en een van sy lang bene hang oor die armrus. Ek het byna elke boek in dié reeks vir Matthew geskryf sodat hy kan wegkom uit sy hartseer lewe. Al is dit net vir ’n uur of twee.

“Kan ek hierdie boek saam met my huis toe vat?” vra hy toe dit tyd is vir hom om sy werkies te gaan doen.

“Liewer nie. Jy weet tog wat sal gebeur as jou pa jou daarmee betrap.”

“Maar hoekom, tannie Betty? Wat het hy teen boeke?”

“Ek weet nie wat die rede daarvoor is nie, Toots,” sê ek en vee sy kuif van sy voorkop af. Hy is reeds ’n sentimeter of so langer as ek. “Jy weet mos jy is welkom om enige tyd hier te kom lees.”

In die jare wat volg, lees Samuel ook elke liewe boek in die reeks. Hy neem my egter nooit in sy vertroue óf aanvaar my vertroosting soos Matthew nie. Sam is so skrikkerig soos ’n vlakhaas; dit is maar wat gebeur wanneer ’n kind in konstante vrees leef. H.G. Wells het eenkeer ’n boek geskryf met die titel *The Invisible Man* en dit is die beste manier om vir arme Sam te beskryf – hy doen sy bes om onsigbaar te wees, om in die agtergrond te verdwyn waar hy nooit in die moeilikheid sal beland nie. Hy kon net so min soos die res van ons aan sy pa se standarde van volmaaktheid voldoen; sy enigste verdediging was dus om so stil en onsigbaar moontlik deur die lewe te gaan.

Wat my hart egter bo enigiets anders breek, is die feit dat die seuns steeds daarna bly streef om hom tevrede te stel, maak nie saak hoeveel Frank hulle slaan of hoeveel keer hy sy liefde en goedkeuring as straf van hulle weerhou nie. Willie het dit op ’n manier reggekry om sy goedkeuring te vind – Matthew en Samuel sien hoe Frank goedkeurend vir hom knik en dit skep by hulle ’n vals hoop dat hy dalk eendag ook só vir hulle sal kyk. Dit skep ook in hulle ’n intense haat vir hulle pa se gunsteling seun.

Frank Wyatt maak aanspraak daarop dat hy die Bybel ken en hy haal dit gereeld aan, maar op ’n manier kyk hy die tragiese verhaal mis van Jakob se voortrekkery van sy seun Josef en die moorddadige jaloesie wat dit by Josef se broers veroorsaak het. Wat met klein Willie gebeur het, is Frank se skuld; hy kon netsowel daardie kind met sy eie twee hande in die dam verdrink het.

Die beeld van Willie se bleek, lewelose liggaam wat uit die ysige water getrek word, is iets wat ek nog nooit uit my geheue kon wis nie. Wat nog erger was, is die feit dat Frank vir Matthew en Sam gedwing het om bewend in die modderige sneeu aan die rand van die dam te staan en kyk hoe die sheriff en sy manne die lyk in hulle boot laai. Hulle sien hulle broer se gevriesde, starende oë; sy stilgemaakte gil. Dit is die enigste rede waarom ek op daardie aaklige dag daar gebly het. Die Here weet, niemand anders sou daardie seuns ’n tikkie vertroosting aangebied het nie.

Willie se dood het almal verander en dit word die groot skeidingslyn tussen hoe dinge nog altyd was en hoe dit vir ewig sal wees. Matthew kon homself nooit vergewe omdat hy daardie dag toegelaat het dat sy boetie op die ys gaan nie. In die jare wat volg, verduur hy oneindige verbale en fisieke mishandeling, maar hy aanvaar sy pa se houe en woede as die straf wat hy regtens verdien. Sam blameer homself omdat hy verdwyn het en nie een van sy twee broers gehelp het nie. Sy selfopgelegde straf is om altyd naby aan



Matthew te bly en saam met hom Frank se tirades te trotseer. Indien enigene van die seuns ooit daarvan gedroom het om Wyatt-boorde te verlaat om van hulle pa af weg te kom, was dit nie langer vir hulle 'n opsie nie. Die boord word hulle tronk, Frank die opsigter; 'n lewenslange straf vir moord.

Lydia kan ook nie die verlies van haar jongste seun verwerk nie. Sy onttrek haar byna geheel en al van die realiteit rondom haar en voer 'n stryd teen depressie. Ek verstaan haar smart, aangesien ek self my geliefde Walter verloor het, maar terwyl ek God se vertroosting aanvaar en my oorgee aan sy wil vir my lewe, aanvaar Lydia haar lyding as God se straf. Dit is 'n idee wat Frank Wyatt by haar tuisbring.

Ná die dood van sy gunsteling seun kan niemand vir Frank troos nie en hy druk sy smart uit in die enigste emosie wat hy ken – woede. Nadat die laaste mense op die middag van Willie se begrafnis huis toe is, vaar hy in ongekende woede teen Lydia uit. Ek het na hulle plaashuis toe gestap om vir Lydia te gaan sê dat Matthew en Samuel by my kothuis is en ek wou hoor of die seuns sommer die aand daar kan slaap. Dit is hoe ek Frank se woedeuitbarsting gehoor het.

“Kyk nou wat het jy gedoen, jou slet! Dit is God se straf vir ons sonde. Die seun van Dawid en Batseba is dood omdat hulle egbreuk gepleeg het en nou moes my seun vir óns sonde sterf.”

Ek gaan sag by die kombuisdeur in en hoor Frank se geskree vanuit die voorkamer kom. Ek gaan haastig nader, bang dat hy dalk my suster sal slaan. Tog weet ek dat ek hulpeloos is om hom te keer indien hy dit sou doen. Ek hoor die geluid van glas wat breek en steek in die deur vas toe ek Lydia op 'n houpie op die vloer sien lê terwyl Frank haar met al haar geliefkoosde ornamente gooi, asof hy haar vir egbreuk stenig.

“God sê: ‘Aan My kom die wraak toe, Ek sal vergeld,’” skree Frank, “en ek het duur betaal vir my een oomblik van swakheid saam met jou. Die duiwel het jou gebruik om my te breek, Lydia! Ek moes jou hoerery gesien het vir wat dit was en jou bestraf het die eerste keer toe jy my in die versoeking gebring het.”

Hy tel 'n porseleinkoppie op wat ek vir haar gekoop het met pragtige viooltjies op, haar gunsteling blom, en hy gooi dit met soveel krag dat dit voor haar in fyn stukkies breek. Lydia se hande bloei van die klein snytjies terwyl sy die stukkies van haar kosbare skat bymekaar probeer maak. Dan gooi Frank die piering wat daarby pas.

“Die seun wat uit Dawid en Batseba se sonde verwek, is die een wat gesterf het,” skree hy. “Dit sou egter 'n te geringe prys gewees het vir ons om te betaal. God eis geregtigheid en my straf is dat die onskuldige seun moes

sterf. Nou sal ek elke dag vir die res van my lewe na ons buite-egtelike kind moet kyk. Ek sal die vrug van ons sonde in die vlees moet aanskou!”

Frank tel ’n professioneel geneemde foto van Lydia en die drie seuns op en gooi dit op die vloer neer. Hy trap met sy skoene se hak daarop totdat die raam, die glas en die foto verwoes is. Ek staan steeds in die deur, verlam deur Frank se gewelddadigheid. Frank sien my nie eens raak toe hy uit die vertrek storm, verblind deur woede, en met die trappe opgaan terwyl sy skoene oor die gebreekte glas kraak wat oor die mat verstrooi lê nie.

Ek sluip by die vertrek in en fluister my suster se naam. “Lydia ... Lydia, kom saam met my, liefie. Ek vat jou nou huis toe.”

Sy beweeg nie, sy kyk nie op nie. Sy huil ook nie. Haar pragtige, bang oë staar onsiende na die mat. Net haar hande beweeg terwyl sy nutteloos aan die stukkende dele van haar skatte vat.

Ek buk stadig voor haar, lig haar ken totdat sy na my kyk. “Lydia? Liefie, luister na my. Frank is verkeerd. Alles wat hy sopas gesê het, is verkeerd. God het nie Willie se lewe geneem om julle te straf nie. Dit was ’n ongeluk ... ’n aaklige, tragiese ongeluk. Dis al.”

Lydia gee geen teken dat sy my hoor nie. Sy staar asof sy regdeur my kyk. Ek sit my arms om haar lyf en probeer haar teen my vasdruk, maar sy reageer steeds nie. Ek staan uiteindelik op en probeer haar regop trek. Sy is ’n dooie gewig.

“Lydia, asseblief ... kom saam met my huis toe. Die seuns is reeds daar en nie een van julle sal ooit hoef terug te kom na hierdie aaklige huis toe nie. Jy hoef nie langer by Frank te bly nie. Jy het jou skuld betaal, Lydia ... meer as genoeg. Laat ek jou asseblief help.”

Haar leweloze oë kyk uiteindelik na my. “Jy wil my help,” sê sy met ’n emosielose, hees stem. “Gaan dan huis toe. Los my alleen.”

“Ek sal net gaan as jy saam met my kom,” sê ek en vat haar bebloede hande sagkens in myne. Sy ruk dit weg.

“Nee. Gaan huis toe en kyk na my seuns. Dit is hoe jy my kan help.”

Ek voel in twee geskeur. Ek wil my suster uit hierdie huis weg hê; weg van haar monster van ’n man, maar ek wil ook nie vir jong Matthew te lank alleen los nie. Hy ly onder ’n selfs groter skuldgevoel as wat Frank of Lydia ooit moes, want hy glo Willie se dood is sy skuld, en ek is bekommerd dat hy homself sal probeer seermaak. Ek smee Lydia tevergeefs totdat ons albei Frank se voetstappe bo in die huis hoor. Hy het waarskynlik sy Sondagsklere vir sy werksklere verruil en sal enige oomblik met die trappe afkom ondertoe. Angs vul Lydia se oë.

“Gaan!” smee sy. “Hou Matthew weg van hom af.”

Ek gaan uit die huis uit, maar bly op 'n afstand staan en kyk totdat Frank ook die huis verlaat en uitgaan skuur toe. Ek moet seker maak dat hy my suster nie seermaak nie. Ek was onnodig bekommerd. Sy het my later vertel dat Frank nooit weer aan haar geraak het nadat hulle Willie begrawe het nie – nie eens sy hand ligkens teen hare laat skuur het nie. Hulle bly in dieselfde huis, slaap in dieselfde kamer, dieselfde bed, maar hulle is ver van mekaar verwyder.

Toe Lydia uiteindelik uit haar skoktoestand kom, lig die depressie ook vir 'n ruk. Sy is steeds 'n pragtige vrou, alhoewel diep bekommerd. Sy smag ook na liefde en aandag. Ongeveer 'n jaar ná Willie se dood begin sy met die trein stad toe reis onder die voorwendsel dat sy 'n dokter gaan sien vir “vroueprobleme”. Sy bieg egter later teenoor my dat sy 'n buite-egtelike liefdesverhouding het – die eerste van baie wat sou volg. Ek kyk magteloos toe terwyl sy die einste ding word waarvan Frank haar beskuldig het. Maar hoe kan ek haar veroordeel? Wie weet watter soort mens ek sou geword het as ek die ongelukkige vrou was wat met Frank Wyatt moes trou?

Vir die buitewêreld het Wyatt-boorde seker soos die Tuin van Eden gelyk. Die bome floreer, die grond bring oeste voort en Frank word een van die rykste vrugteboere in die distrik. Hy koop die nuutste plaastoerusting, eksperimenteer met nuwe metodes, huur ekstra arbeiders om saam met sy twee fris seuns te werk en kry selfs iemand om sy vrou in die huis te help. Trots op alles wat hy opgebou het, begin hy die tradisie om jaarliks in die herfs 'n ope dag op sy plaas te hou sodat almal in die distrik sy rykdom kan sien en hom dit kan beny. En dit is beslis wat hulle gedoen het.

Die hartseerste ironie rondom die hele tragedie is dat Matthew 'n gebore boer is. Frank kon nie vir 'n meer perfekte seun gevra het nie; een wat so lief is vir die plaas, so 'n fyn aanvoeling het vir die ritme van die seisoene en die diere en die bome wat hy moet versorg. Tog bly Frank heeltemal blind vir die groot geskenk wat God vir hom gegee het.

Op een en twintig is Matthew 'n aantreklike man en byna elke hubare meisie in Deer Springs het haar oog op hom. Hy het Lydia se onvergeetlike skoonheid, haar donker oë en verleidelike glimlag, in 'n manlike vorm geërf. En as sy biologiese pa, Ted Bartlett, net die helfte van Matthew se sjarme gehad het, is dit geen wonder dat Lydia so hard vir hom geval het nie. Al die meisies in Deer Springs stroom elke herfs na die ope dag op die plaas met die hoop om die kroonprins van Wyatt-boorde onder oë te kry. Met elke nuwe jaar word Matthew se liefde vir Wyatt-boorde al hoe dieper – maar terselfdertyd word sy haat vir sy pa ook sterker. Dié twee vyandige emosies kan eenvoudig nie onbepaald saam in Matthew se hart leef nie.

Die opedag van 1916 begin die aanloop tot die groot ramp. Die dag is 'n reusesukses met honderde mense wat hulde bring aan alles wat Frank bereik het. Lydia dek in die agterplaas tafels waar kos en appelsider bedien word en toe die feestelikheid tot 'n einde kom en die laaste mense huis toe is, help ek haar opruim. Skielik hoor ons 'n groot rumoer in die skuur met Frank en Matthew wat hard op mekaar skree. Ons het geen idee wat dié herrie veroorsaak het nie. Ons los alles net so en hardloop nader.

Een van die Peterson-dogters sit bang in die hoek van die skuur naby die hooi en Matthew staan met sy rug na haar toe, gereed om haar te beskerm en homself teen sy pa te verdedig. Frank het 'n rysweep in sy hand en dreig om hulle al twee daarmee te slaan.

“Hoe durf jy daar staan en dit ontken?” brul Frank. “Ek het julle op heterdaad betrap.”

“Ons het niks gedoen nie. Net gesoen, niks meer nie,” hou Matthew vol waar hy met sy hande voor hom uitgestrek staan om sy pa te keer. Toe hy oor sy skouer vir die meisie beduie om weg te kom, hardloop sy huilend van angsty by die skuur uit.

Frank trek voordeel uit die oomblik en beweeg vorentoe terwyl hy Matthew met die sweep slaan. “Ek sal jou leer om nie jou wellustige dade uit te leef nie. Dalk sal dít die wellus uit jou kry!”

Aan die begin hou Matthew net sy arms voor sy gesig en verdedig homself teen die aanslag terwyl hy agteruit in die rigting van die hoop strooi beweeg. Terwyl die sweep oor sy voorarms, sy hande en sy kopvel brand en gewelddadige wonde los, bereik iets in Matthew uiteindelik breekpunt. Jare se opgekropte woede ontplof skielik. Hy bespring sy pa en gryp die sweep uit sy hand uit, gooi dit op die grond neer. Dan draai Matthew na Frank toe en daar is moord in sy oë.

“Ek sweer voor God ek sal jou doodmaak voordat jy ooit weer aan my slaan!” Hy slaan vir Frank met die vuig in die maag en voordat die ouer man kan herstel, begin Matthew hom met sy vuiste bydam, laat reën die houe op hom neer totdat Frank agteroor steier tot teen die muur. Matthew hou aan en slaan sonder ophou. Ek en Lydia kyk hulpeloos toe, skree tevergeefs dat hy moet ophou, nie in staat om naby genoeg te kom om in te gryp sonder dat ons ook sal seerkry nie.

Frank probeer eers terugbakei en kry 'n hou of twee teen Matthew se kakebeen in, maar die seun vou sy hande om Frank se keel en stoei hom op die grond neer, gereed om die lewe uit hom te wurg. Frank se oë begin uitpeul en sy gesig word rooi, dan blou terwyl Matthew wydsbeen oor hom sit en sy kop teen die grond stamp. Ek glo Matthew sou hom net daar doodgemaak het

as Sam nie betyds by die skuur ingekom het nie. Hy gryp sy broer van agter af, trek sy greep los en sleep hom van sy pa af.

Tog gee woede steeds vir Matthew krag. Hy wil nie ophou nie. Hy gooi sy broer agteroor tot in die strooi, tel dan die rysweep op en begin Frank genadeloos daarmee slaan, net soos Frank hom sy lewe lank geslaan het.

“Jou jammerlike verskoning van ’n man!” skree Matthew. “Dit is vir al die jare wat jy my met jou vervloekte riem gemartel het. Hoe voel dit om hulpeloos te wees? Hoe voel dit? Ek was ’n kind! Ek kon myself destyds nie teen jou verdedig nie, maar ek sweer jy sal betaal vir alles wat jy al daardie jare aan my gedoen het.”

Die sweep skeur Frank se hemp aan flarde en sny sy gesig en arms met bloederige wonde terwyl hy homself probeer verdedig. Sam kom weer van agter af en probeer sy broer gryp.

“Hou op, Matthew! Hou op! Moet hom nie doodmaak nie. Dit is nie moeite werd om oor hom te hang nie.”

“Ek sal eerder gehang word as om groot te word en soos hy te wees. Ek haat jou!” skree hy toe hy in Frank se gesig spoeg. Matthew probeer homself uit Sam se greep loswoel sodat hy heeltemal met Frank kan afreken. “Ek kan nie vir jou sê hoeveel keer ek jou al wou doodmaak nie. Hoeveel keer ek al voor God gewens het jy is nie my pa nie.”

“Hy is nie,” skree Lydia. “Hy is nie jou regte pa nie, Matthew. Jy sal nooit soos hy wees nie, want Frank is nie jou regte pa nie.” Sy is desperaat om te keer dat Matthew vir Frank doodmaak.

Haar woorde dring uiteindelik deur Matthew se moorddadige woede. Hy hou lank genoeg op stoei sodat Sam die sweep uit sy greep kan kry. Sam stamp hom agteroor tot in die strooi, weg van Frank af, en gaan staan dan vasbeslote tussen die twee mans terwyl hy Matthew smee met trane wat oor sy wange loop.

“Moet hom asseblief nie doodmaak nie, Matt,” smee hy. “Ek kan hom net so min verdra soos jy, maar ek wil nie hê jy moet hang omdat jy vir hom gegee het wat hy verdien nie.”

Matthew kyk na sy ma, sy borskas wat vinnig beweeg soos hy asemhaal. Sy aantreklike gesig vertrek van die intense haat wat hy voel. “Is dit waar? Wat het Ma nou net gesê?”

“Dit is waar,” huil sy. “Ek moes jou jare gelede al die waarheid vertel het. Frank is nie jou pa nie. Ek het hom mislei, want ek was reeds swanger met jou en jou regte pa was met iemand anders getroud.”

“My régte pa?” mompel hy. “Bedoel Ma hierdie waardelose stuk ... vuilgoed is nie familie van my nie?” Hy swaai met sy voet na Frank en skop

hom vol strooi en mis. Frank lê doodstil, uitasem en bloeiend, nie in staat om homself met sy gebreekte gewrig en drie gekraakte ribbes regop te kry nie.

“Hy is nie familie van jou nie, Matthew,” sê Lydia vertroostend. “Los hom nou. Jy het hom genoeg laat betaal.”

Matthew lyk soos ’n man wat pas wakker geword en besef het sy lang nagmerrie is net ’n droom. Hy lag kliphard. “Bedoel Ma ... Bedoel Ma daar is nie ’n enkele druppel van sy vieslike bloed in my are nie?”

“Nee, Matthew. Nie een druppel nie. Jy sal nooit soos hy wees nie. Jy kan nie.”

Dan verdwyn sy glimlag toe die volle betekenis van wat sy ma sopas gesê het ook insink. Hy skud sy kop verdwaas, ’n gewonde kind wat wreed verraaï is. “Maar ... as hy nie my pa is nie, hoekom dan? Hoekom het Ma hom toegelaat om my al die jare te slaan sonder dat hy die reg daartoe gehad het? Ek het gedink Ma is lief vir my ... ”

Lydia voel duiselig toe sy besef wat sy sopas gedoen het. “Ek is lief vir jou, Matthew,” roep sy uit. “’n Vaderlose kind sou niks hê nie, niks wees nie. Ek wou net die heel beste vir jou hê. Ek wou hê jy moes alles hê wat hier is.”

“So ... Ma het hom toegelaat om my te slaan? Ma het gedink dít is die beste vir my?”

Ek sien wat aan die gebeur is en ek vou vinnig my arms om Lydia om haar regop te hou. Ek is doodbang namens haar; namens Matthew ook. Sy het die waarheid bely ten einde haar seun te red, om te keer dat hy moord pleeg, maar sy het hom nogtans verloor. Ek moet Matthew van albei sy ouers af wegkry sodat ek met hom kan praat.

“Kom saam met my, Matthew, kom saam met my huis toe,” sê ek en los vir Lydia terwyl ek hom saggies aan die arm vat. “Jy bloei. Ek sal jou wonde versorg.”

“Nie in my huis nie!” hyg Frank. My hart vries toe ek die haat in sy stem hoor. “Daardie seun sal nooit weer ’n voet in my huis sit nie.” Frank se gesig vertrek van pyn toe hy homself met sy onbeseerde arm regop druk. Hy kyk stip na Lydia en sy oë is soos ’n mes. “Wat jy gedoen het ... al die jare vir my gejoj ... is onvergeeflik. Het jy gedink jy kan my boord by my steel? Wel, jou seun sal nooit soveel as ’n modderkluit van my grond besit nie. Ek sal môreoggend vir John Wakefield gaan sien en jou buite-egtelike seun uit my testament haal. Kry hom nou onder my oë en van my eiendom af ... Vanaand nog! Ek wil nooit weer sy gesig sien nie.”

Ek lei vinnig vir Matthew by die skuur uit terwyl hy nog te stomgeslaan is om hom teë te sit. Lydia en Sam volg my, maar ek draai terug na Sam toe ons by die deur kom en keer hom. “Gaan terug en help jou pa,” sê ek vir hom.

Hy skud sy kop. “Nee. Ek haat hom ook.”

“Ek weet, Sam, maar jy is al wat hy oorhet. Hy sal jou van nou af anders behandel. Jy sal sien.”

“Ek gee nie om nie. Ek wil saam met Matthew weggaan.”

“Jy kan nie, seun,” sê ek sag. “Jou pa het jou nodig. Vat hom nou dadelik dorp toe. Sê vir die dokter ... sê vir hom een van die perde het vir Frank vertrap ... en die leisels het hom so gesny.” Sam doen teësinning wat ek vra.

Ek maak dadelik vuur nadat ek, Lydia en Matthew by my huis aankom. Al drie van ons bewe. Ek maak ’n pot koffie en probeer Matthew sover kry om te sit en daarvan te drink, om my toe te laat om sy wonde te versorg, om iets te eet, maar hy stap heen en weer in die kombuis terwyl skok en haat deur sy are bruis.

“Moet my asseblief nie haat nie,” smeek Lydia. “Asseblief, Matthew.” Hy kyk nie eens na haar nie.

“Ek gaan hier weg,” sê hy en trek sy vingers deur sy hare. “Ek moet vanaand nog hier wegkom.”

“Wag net ’n bietjie, Toots,” paai ek. “Jy moet eers mooi hieroor dink. Moenie sommerso hier weggaan sonder enige planne en niks geld in jou sak nie. Jy kan vir ’n rukkie hier by my bly.”

“Ek het planne. Ek gaan by die weermag aansluit. Ek dink nou al ’n lang ruk daaraan.”

“Dit is ’n baie slegte idee,” sê ek. “Dit is net ’n kwessie van tyd voordat die Verenigde State by daardie aaklige oorlog betrek word wat in Europa aan die gang is, en as jy nou inskryf, sal jy een van die eerstes wees wat daarheen gestuur word. Jy wil tog nie so graag sterf nie, of hoe?”

Hy antwoord nie, maar terwyl ek kyk hoe hy heen en weer stap, wonder ek tog of om by die weermag aan te sluit nie dalk die beste ding is nie. Matthew het ’n leeftyd se woede opgekrop en dalk is die oorlogsveld die beste plek om daarvan ontslae te raak. Dan sal hy dalk sonder haat terugkom na ons toe.

“Ek het my klere en ander goed nodig,” sê hy uiteindelik en kom staan voor my. “Tannie Betty, sal Tannie dit vir my gaan haal?”

Ek sug gelate. “Ek sal gaan kyk of Sam en jou pa ... of Sam vir Frank al dorp toe gevat het om die dokter te gaan sien. Sodra hulle weg is, kan jy self jou goed gaan haal.”

En dit is presies wat hy doen. Ek en Lydia huil net so hard soos op Willie se begrafnis terwyl ons kyk hoe hy sy besittings in ’n ou drasak pak. Sy weggaan is nog ’n dood in ons familie, nog ’n verlies. Toe hy ons met ’n soen groet, wonder ons albei of ons hom ooit weer sal sien.

“Belowe jy sal vir my skryf, Toots,” sê ek toe ek ’n Bybel en twee

twintigdollarnote in sy hand druk. “Laat weet ons waar jy is en of dit goed gaan met jou.”

“Vergewe my, asseblief, Matthew,” sê Lydia terwyl sy vir die laaste keer aan hom vasklou. “Ek het gekyk, want ek is lief vir jou. Ek wou jou nie verloor nie.”

Hy knik net, nie in staat om te praat nie. Dan maak Matthew hom uit haar arms los en verlaat ons.

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Ek probeer vir Lydia oortuig om van Frank te skei. Sy weier. “Ek verdien wat hy ook al aan my doen,” hou sy vol. “Ek het vir hom gekyk.”

Verbasend genoeg verkondig Frank nie haar skande in die openbaar deur haar uit te skop nie. Ek wonder eers hoekom, maar dan besef ek Frank wil nie hê die buitewêreld moet weet sy klein koninkryk is vol swak plekke nie. Die skandaal van ’n egskeiding sal Wyatt-boorde se naam besmet en Frank se reputasie vernietig. Dit is baie beter om hulle klein geheimpie weg te steek en te maak of daar niks verkeerd is in die wit huis op die heuwel nie. Matthew is maar net weg om sy patriotiese plig uit te voer, dis al.

Meer as ’n jaar gaan verby voordat ons iets van Matthew hoor. In Maart 1918 stuur hy vir Lydia ’n brief na my adres toe. Hy skryf van iewers in Frankryk om te sê hy het sy ma vergewe. Die oorlog het hom verander, skryf hy. Dit het vir hom gewys hoe vernietigend die krag van onbeteuelde haat kan wees. Hy is moeg vir doodmaak. Moeg vir al die verwoesting. Hy wil weer die vrugbare grond tussen sy vingers voel; wil die lewe koester en versorg en kyk hoe dit groei. Hy wil huis toe kom, maar hy weet dat hy dit nooit sal kan doen nie. Wyatt-boorde is nie langer sy tuiste nie. Dit sal eendag aan Sam behoort – Frank Wyatt se regte seun.

“Het Frank sy testament verander sodat Sam alles erf?” vra ek vir Lydia nadat sy vir my Matthew se brief gewys het.

“Natuurlik,” antwoord sy. “So seer en gekneus as wat hy was, het hy vroeg daardie volgende oggend na sy prokureur toe gery. Ek het die ou testament opgefrommel in die asblik gekry die dag nadat Matthew weg is.”

Op daardie oomblik daal ’n vreemde stilte oor Lydia neer, soos swartryp. Terwyl sy die niet in staar, begin my suster van my af wegglip. Ek sukkel om ’n manier te kry om haar terug te bring.

“Luister, Lydia, kom ons skryf sommer nou dadelik vir Matthew ’n brief. Ek het geld gespaar en ek sal dit enige tyd vir hom leen. Hy kan sy eie plaas



koop en hom daar vestig; hy kan dalk selfs hier naby iewers 'n plek kry wat te koop is en dan kan ons by hom gaan kuier. Ek sal vir John Wakefield vra om uit te kyk vir 'n goeie stukkie grond.”

Lydia knik en drink haar koffie klaar, maar sy skryf nie die brief nie. Ek kyk hoe sy haar baadjie aantrek en dan teen die heuwel op stap na haar huis toe, en ek wonder of sy ooit 'n woord gehoor wat ek gesê het.

Laat daardie aand sit ek in my kothuis 'n manuskrip en tik toe my voordeur skielik oopgaan en Lydia instap. Sy het nie 'n jas of stewels aan nie, al is die grond met 'n dun lagie sneeu bedek. Sy sweef oor die vertrek na my toe asof sy in haar slaap loop. Haar oë is wyd oop en sy staar na my, deur my. Haar hande lyk donkerder as haar arms en ek dog eers sy het handskoene aan. Toe sy egter die brief vir my gee wat sy die oggend van Matthew af gekry het, sien ek die rooi vingerafdrukke op die koevert en ek besef Lydia se hande is vol bloed. Dit vlek die voorkant van haar rok en voorskoot donker.

“Lydia, wat makeer? Jy bloei. Waar het jy seergekry?” Ek gryp haar hande, want ek dink sy het dalk haar polse gesny, maar daar is geen wonde nie.

“Skryf vir Matthew,” sê sy. “Sê vir hom hy kan nou huis toe kom. Ek het alles vir hom reggemaak.”

“Wat bedoel jy? Waarvan praat jy? Lydia, sit sodat ek kan kyk waar al hierdie bloed vandaan kom.”

“Dit is nie myne nie,” sê sy en glimlag effens. “Dit is syne.”

“Wie s'n?” Sy antwoord nie. Ek het haar nog nooit voorheen so ver verwyder van die werklikheid gesien nie. Ek gryp haar aan die skouers, bang om te dink wat sy gedoen het. “Lydia, sê vir my wat jy gedoen het.”

“Ek het vir Frank doodgemaak.”

Ek los haar, staan van haar af weg. “O, asseblief, nee!”

Ek los haar in die middel van my kothuis se woonkamer en hardloop in die donker teen die heuwel op. Al haat ek Frank Wyatt ook hoeveel, wil ek steeds nie hê my suster moet vir sy dood hang nie.

“Frank!” skree ek toe ek hulle kombuisdeur oopstamp. “Frank, waar is jy?” Ek hardloop deur die huis en roep sy naam totdat ek hom op sy studeerkamer se vloer in 'n plas bloed opgekrul kry. Ek kniel langs hom. Hy draai sy kop en kyk na my, sy oë die ene angs en sy mond beweeg geluidloos. Hy leef nog!

'n Bebloede slagtersmes lê langs hom op die vloer. Hy druk met al twee sy hande teen sy maag terwyl die bloed uit hom loop.

Ek hardloop kombuis toe en gryp 'n klomp vadoeke, gaan kniel dan weer by hom en druk dit in die wond in sy maag. Hy kreun toe ek hard teen die wond druk om die bloeding te stop. Sy oë rol agteroor.

“Nee, moenie nou bewusteloos raak nie, Frank. Bly wakker. Bly by my.”

Ek kyk in die vertrek rond na iets wat ek op sy gesig kan spat om hom by te bring, maar die koffiekoppie op sy lessenaar is leeg. Ek slaan hom teen sy wange totdat sy oë weer oopgaan. “Waar is Sam? Frank, ek moet Sam stuur om hulp te gaan haal. Waar is hy?”

Sy mond vorm die woord “skuur”.

“Druk dit styf teen die wond, Frank, en moenie jou bewussyn verloor nie. Ek is nou terug.”

Ek kry Sam in die skuur by die perde. Sy oë rek wyd toe hy die wilde uitdrukking op my gesig sien, die bloed aan my hande en op my rok.

“Jou pa het seergekry. Hy het ’n dokter nodig. Gaan so vinnig as wat jy kan dorp toe en bring dokter Gilbert saam met jou terug.”

Sam spring op die perd se rug sonder om hom op te saal en jaag die nag in. Teen die tyd dat ek die dokter se perdekar buite hoor, het ek Frank met ’n kombers toegegooi en kon ek dit regkry om die bloedvloei te demp. Hy is nog by sy bewussyn, alhoewel hy glad nie praat nie. Sy oë volg my bewegings toe ek die bebloede mes van die vloer af optel en dit in sy lessenaar se laai wegsteek. Oomblikke later stap die dokter in die vertrek in en trek sy jas uit.

“Wat het hier gebeur, Betty? Hoe gaan dit met hom?” Ek antwoord nie, maar staan net opsy sodat dokter Gilbert hom kan ondersoek. “Jy het gekeer dat hy in skok gaan ... dit is goed. Dit lyk vir my na ’n lelike steekwond. Wat het gebeur?”

“Ek weet nie,” antwoord ek kalm. “Lydia het na my huis toe gekom en vir my gesê hy het ’n ongeluk gehad. Ek het Sam gestuur om hulp te gaan kry en toe die bloeding probeer stop.”

“Het jy ’n ongeluk gehad, Frank?”

Ek sien hom net vir ’n oomblik aarsel voordat hy knik.

“Ek het kookwater nodig, Betty, en soveel handdoeke as wat jy het. Wat het gebeur, Frank?” hoor ek die dokter weer vra toe ek die vertrek verlaat om te gaan haal wat hy nodig het. “Kan jy vir my vertel wat gebeur het?” Ek hoor nie Frank se antwoord nie.

“Waar is Lydia?” vra dokter Gilbert toe ek ’n paar minute later terugkeer na die studeerkamer. “Ek moet uitvind wat hierdie wond veroorsaak het sodat ek kan weet waarmee ek besig is.”

Ek onthou Lydia se vreemde, onrustige gemoedstoestand en ek is skielik bang om haar onthalwe. “Ek ... ek weet nie. Ek het haar by my kothuis gelos. Ek sal haar gaan soek.”

Ek hardloop teen die heuwel af en wonder hoe ek so dom kon gewees het. Ek het Lydia alleen gelos!

My kothuis se deur staan oop, maar Lydia is weg. Ek dwaal ’n paar minute

lank in die donker rond, roep na haar, bewend van koue en vrees voordat ek besef ek moet 'n lig gaan haal en in die vars sneeu na haar voetspore soek. Ek volg dit oor my werf in die rigting van die dam en 'n nare voorgevoel pak my beet.

Haar spore loop oor die dun ys tot by die swart, gapende gat waardeur Lydia geval het. Net haar voorskoot dryf op die donker oppervlak.

Ek sak op die sagte sneeu langs die dam neer en huil.

# Wyatt Orchards

*Fall 1931*

“That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full.”

DEUT.11:14–15

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Of course, Dr. Gilbert was nobody's fool," Aunt Batty said as she finished her story. "He insisted that it looked like an attempted murder and a suicide—and he was right. He and Frank had a terrible falling-out because of it. The editor of the *Deer Springs News* was about to print the doctor's speculations on the front page of the paper when Frank found out and threatened to sue him for libel. The paper had no proof to back up those accusations, Frank said. No murder weapon was ever found, no suicide note—and they had Frank's sworn testimony about what had really happened."

"So did he print the story?" I asked. Aunt Batty and I sat on one of the narrow wooden bunks in the pickers' quarters, with the clean straw still piled in the wheelbarrow in front of us. Neither of us had gotten any work done as she'd told the tragic tale.

"No, the newspaper backed down rather than face a lawsuit it couldn't win. The official story will always be that Frank Wyatt accidentally stabbed himself while sharpening an auger. When his distraught wife went for help she lost her bearings in the dark and fell through the thin ice and drowned in the pond."

I tried to figure out what all this meant for me and my kids, but I couldn't think clearly after learning the horrible secrets that were hidden in this family's past. The tiny picker cabin felt stifling, so I stood on the bunk and shoved one of the windows open to let in a little air.

"Do you think Lydia altered Frank's will before she tried to kill him?" I asked as I sat down beside Aunt Batty again.

“Well, if Frank’s will gives everything to Matthew—then yes, I think she must have swapped the two. Lydia told me she’d found the old one in the garbage. That must have been what she meant when she said she’d fixed it so Matthew could come home again.”

“But why didn’t Frank ever notice the switch?”

Aunt Batty shrugged. “How often does anybody dig through his records and reread his own will? As far as Frank knew, the old one went into the trash and the new one went into effect. He thought Sam would inherit everything.”

A faint breeze blew into the room, carrying the sweet smell of fresh straw. I saw a faint glimmer of hope for the first time since I’d learned about Frank’s will from Mr. Wakefield.

“Aunt Batty, will you come into town with me and explain to Mr. Wakefield what really happened? Maybe he remembers drawing up the second will. Maybe he’ll be able to see that the old one was all crinkled up and then ironed out or something.”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up, Toots,” she said, taking my hand between hers. “Frank worked very hard to bury the truth along with Lydia. No one will ever believe us because no one ever knew that Matthew wasn’t Frank’s real son. We’re just Frank’s crazy old sister-in-law and his scheming daughter-in-law. Besides, if that’s the only official will that was ever found and it was all legally signed and attested to, then there’s really nothing Mr. Wakefield can do but enforce it.”

“So I have to wait until they find Matthew?”

“I think that would be the wisest thing.”

“But what will Matthew do? The orchard is in his name—do you think he’ll take it away from us?”

“I really don’t know,” she said with a sigh. “That depends on how much Matthew has changed in the past fourteen years, and what he’s been doing with himself all this time. He once loved this place...but he

loved Sam, too. Maybe he'll agree to let the two of you share the place."

She bent to lift the half-filled tick we'd abandoned and held the mouth of it open. I grabbed a big handful of straw and stuffed it inside. If only I knew for sure whether or not Gabe was really Matthew. If only I knew what to do.

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All of a sudden it was midsummer, and things got so hectic at the orchard that I didn't have much time to worry about Matthew Wyatt. Frank's regular pickers came back to harvest the Montmorency cherries—and later the peaches and pears and apples—but there were so many other people out of work that year that I found men standing in line every morning, begging to pick cherries for me. Some of the city folks said they'd work for a quart of milk or a dozen eggs—anything, just so they could feed their families. I thanked the good Lord that my kids would always have enough to eat as long as we lived on a farm.

Gabe did a fine job of overseeing the work—teaching the newcomers how to pick and breaking up the squabbles that broke out between them and the regulars. He set up a table for me at the end of one of the rows and Aunt Batty showed me how to record each person's name and the number of buckets they picked so I could pay them at the end of the day. We dumped all the day's pickings into lugs and loaded them onto the wagon, then Gabe and I drove the horses to the open-air market early the next morning to sell our cherries.

I'd never been to the open-air market before. We watched what all the other growers did, then got in line and paid our quarter to get on the market ourselves. The buyers who came to look over our cherries seemed determined to pay rock bottom prices, blaming it on the economic depression. Gabe drove a hard bargain though, refusing to

budge, and as more growers arrived with their fruit, they slowly bumped us down the line without making a sale. I started to get worried.

“Take their price, Gabe. It’s the best we can do.”

“No, I won’t let you be cheated.” Gabe looked as tough and unyielding as all the other farmers—a far cry from the soft-spoken Gabe I’d grown accustomed to. “This is top-quality fruit and they all know it. We could probably sell it at the fruit exchange for the price these crooks are offering. I think we should stand firm.”

We were almost out of line and off the market when one of the buyers finally agreed on Gabe’s price. Relief flooded through me as we drove to the buyer’s stall and unloaded the lugs onto his platform. I felt drained, and this was only my first crop of cherries, my first day on the market. I still had the rest of the season’s harvest to sell.

“I’m not sure my nerves can take all this bargaining,” I told Gabe as we drove the empty wagon home again. “I’m not cut out to be a poker player.”

Gabe laughed. “You’ll get used to it. The secret is not to appear too anxious to sell. Act as though you could take it or leave it.”

“Well, you were certainly a good actor.” I kept my eyes on the road ahead of us, afraid to look at Gabe, aware of him watching me. “With all that ballyhoo you sounded more like a sideshow hawker than a writer.”

“Sometimes a journalist has to use a bit of ballyhoo if he’s a freelancer like me. Editors can be a lot like fruit buyers—why pay top dollar for a story if you can get it for a little less?” Gabe shifted slightly on the seat beside me and I felt him brush against me.

“Well, you got us a real good price. I’m grateful. And I want you to take some of this money as your pay.”

“No, keep it. I don’t want any money. I’m still paying you back for saving my life.”



I glanced at him, then quickly looked away. “Gabe, that debt has long-since been paid.”

“Well, I don’t feel that way. I’m still very much in your debt.”

His stubbornness frustrated me. “Listen, it’s not right that you work so hard all the time for nothing.”

“I’d hardly call it nothing,” he said, sounding huffy himself. “Don’t forget, besides the fact that you saved my life, I’ve been getting free room and board all this time—while a lot of other men are out of work.”

“Be reasonable, Gabe—”

“I am being reasonable! You’re the one who’s being unreasonable. You—” Gabe stopped. He shook his head, laughing softly.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“When it comes to ‘mule-headed stubbornness,’ as you once called it, I’d say we’re pretty evenly matched—you and I.”

He spoke the last words very softly—you and I—like they were holy or something. I could tell by his voice that he was looking at me but I kept my head down, concentrating on the horses’ hindquarters in front of me. We sat side by side on the wagon seat, dangerously close, and I knew that if I looked into his eyes just then I’d want to kiss him again—and then I would be lost. Winky couldn’t come to my rescue this time. How could I love someone so much and yet be so afraid of him at the same time?

“Why are you so afraid of me?” Gabe suddenly asked. He’d read my thoughts and that scared me even more. “Have you been that badly hurt by someone, Eliza?”

I realized that I was trapped alone with Gabe, the very thing I’d tried to avoid all summer. I didn’t want to open my heart to him but I had no way to escape. We were still a good mile or so from home. I snapped the reins to speed the horses into a trot.

“No,” I finally answered. “I already told you why...because I don’t

know anything about you.”

“Fair enough. But I don’t know very much about you, either.” His voice had a hard edge to it all of a sudden, that I’d never heard before. My heart hammered with fear. “Shall we tell all there is to tell, Eliza? What would you like to know? Where I spent my childhood? Albany, New York. Now, where did you spend yours?”

I was afraid to answer, afraid not to. “No one place,” I finally said, swallowing hard. “I traveled all over with my daddy...because of his work.”

“Well. That explains why you don’t know how to play baseball.” His tone was so cold I had to fight back my tears. “What was your father’s line of work?” he continued. “Some sort of traveling salesman? My father was an attorney. A very prominent attorney, in fact.”

“Why are you acting this way?” I asked, trying not to cry.

“Because I care for you, Eliza, and I think you care for me. I want to know why you keep pushing me away. You say it’s because you know nothing about me—but you know a lot about me. We’ve worked together for nearly six months, you’ve talked with me every day, you’ve seen how I treat you and your kids. What more do you need to know?”

“Is Gabe Harper your real name?” I blurted out.

My question took him by surprise. He hesitated just a moment too long.

“Yes.”

I knew he was lying. I knew it.

I pulled the horses to a halt and tossed the reins to him, then stood to climb down. Gabe grabbed my arm to stop me. “What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“I’d like to walk for a while, if you don’t mind.”

He pulled roughly on my arm, jerking me back down onto the seat. “If anyone is going to walk, it’ll be me,” he said, pushing the reins

into my hand. Before I could stop him, he jumped to the ground and strode down the road with his back to me. He had a slight limp in his step, just as I'd warned him he would.

I flicked the reins and signaled to the horses to giddap, passing Gabe a moment later and leaving him behind.

From then on I made Gabe go by himself to the open-air market or the fruit exchange. He didn't like my decision, but I insisted that one of us needed to stay home and oversee the pickers, and he finally agreed. Sometimes Jimmy and Luke rode along with him, but only if they'd finished pulling weeds in the vegetable garden for Aunt Batty. She had a real green thumb when it came to making things grow, and she had brought in a bumper crop of vegetables. Gabe took some of the produce into town to sell, but a lot of it Aunt Batty just gave away to folks. I didn't mind. We had much more than we could ever use.

Aunt Batty helped me with the canning that summer. I got so used to hearing her singing those hymns for all she was worth that I even joined in with her and Becky every once in a while. Aunt Batty had somehow convinced my daughter that cleaning strawberries, peeling tomatoes, and stuffing cucumbers into pickle jars was fun, so we had an extra pair of willing hands. One afternoon the three of us were giggling like schoolgirls as we canned peaches, and without even thinking I tossed four peaches into the air and did a little juggling act, just to see if I still remembered how. Becky stared at me, dumbfounded.

"Mama! How'd you do that?"

Aunt Batty looked up from her pot of boiling syrup and applauded. "My goodness, Eliza! We had no idea you were so talented!"

I quickly caught the four peaches and set them on the table, angry that I'd given away a secret part of myself like that.

"Do it again, Mama!"

I couldn't look at Becky. "Not now. We have work to do."

“Wait till I tell Jimmy and Luke and Mr. Harper what you can do!”

“No! You will not tell them a thing, Becky Jean! I won’t do it again—for them or anybody else.”

My words came out harsher than I’d intended. Becky’s bottom lip quivered as she fought tears. “Why not, Mama?”

“Because...just because.” I’d always hated it when my daddy gave me that answer, and now here I was saying the same thing. But there were some things I just couldn’t explain to a four-year old.

We canned about sixteen quarts of peaches that day and stored them on the shelves in my cellar. It always gave me a feeling of pride to see the rows of home-canned goods on those shelves— tomatoes, green beans, pickles, peaches, pears, and rows of colorful jams and jellies—food that would feed my family come wintertime.

Aunt Batty bribed Jimmy and Luke with Herman Walters’ adventure books and got them to do all kinds of chores, like running the cultivator between the corn rows and cleaning out the root cellar. Pretty soon we would fill that root cellar with potatoes, onions, carrots, squash, beets, and turnips. The two pigs she bought had fattened up real nice, and the rich cream from Myrtle’s milk had earned us extra cash from the creamery in town. The money helped us buy all the necessities we couldn’t grow, like coffee, baking powder, flour, and sugar. A lot of people went hungry that year, but the good Lord had blessed us with abundance, and Aunt Batty made sure we all thanked Him every night when the six of us gathered around the table for dinner.

In August the new Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog arrived. During more prosperous times, I always ordered new school clothes for the boys and let their last year’s school clothes become play clothes. But this year money was too tight. The boys would have to make do with hand-me-downs and patched-up clothes come September. They certainly wouldn’t be the only kids at school with their ankles

showing below their britches. We needed to save our money to buy a load of coal to get us through the winter and to buy spray ingredients next spring at Peterson's store since Merle wouldn't let me buy on credit. Gabe had given me a list of farm supplies we just couldn't do without, and the only other thing I ordered from Sears that year were new shoes for Jimmy to replace the ones he'd outgrown.

I finished filling out the order form at the kitchen table one night and had tallied it all up when it occurred to me that Aunt Batty might have something she wanted to add. I went looking for her in the parlor where all three kids sat around the radio listening to *Amos 'n Andy*. She wasn't there.

"Where's Aunt Batty?" I had to practically shout before I got anyone's attention. "Hey there! Have you seen Aunt Batty?" It was like they were all hypnotized or something. I had to wonder whether listening to that radio was doing my kids any good.

"I think she's outside talking to Mr. Harper," Jimmy finally answered.

I saw no sign of her out in the yard. When I went inside the barn, I heard voices coming from the workshop where Gabe slept. He'd left the door open just a crack. I knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but I couldn't resist. I wanted to hear what she and Gabe were talking about.

"No, don't spare my feelings, Aunt Batty," Gabe said. "I asked for your honest opinion. I want to hear what you really think of it."

"I think it's a very good story," she said. "And very safe."

"Safe? What do you mean?"

"Is this the kind of writing you do all the time? Newspaper articles like this?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because this article is very well-written, very informative...but very dispassionate," Aunt Batty told him. "That's fine for newspaper

articles; it's what's expected. But I've come to know you pretty well, Gabe, and you're a very sensitive, perceptive man, capable of great feeling. Why doesn't the true Gabe Harper come through in your writing? You're not a dispassionate person."

"You said it yourself, it's not what's expected in a good newspaper article. I don't write fiction or essays—"

"Why not?"

"Well...because...I just don't."

"Get angry, Gabe! Get excited, get passionate! All truly great writers are never afraid to put their feelings, their very selves, into their work. It's true of every profession, I think. It's why John Wakefield makes such a fine attorney...It's what Eliza had to learn in order to make this orchard work. Great writers don't hold back part of themselves. But I think you're holding back, Gabe."

"Why do you say that?"

"There's none of your own experiences in what you write, only your indifferent observations. You need to put yourself onto the page."

Silence filled the long pause. I wondered what they were both doing.

"That idea scares you to death for some reason, doesn't it?" Aunt Batty finally said. "I can see it in your eyes."

"Yes, I admit it scares me."

I remembered how good Gabe's hobo story was, yet I'd learned nothing about him from reading it. But the stories Gabe wrote about his father and about his younger brother falling through the ice—those had the kind of feeling I think Aunt Batty meant. He must not have let her read those stories—and I thought I knew why.

"Do you know why my books were so popular?" Aunt Batty asked. "It was because when I wrote my series for girls, I remembered my own girlish yearning to be like Nellie Bly and I tapped into my own soul. I wrote about the longing I had to be my own person, not just

somebody's daughter or wife, my longing to make the right decisions and to be what God created me to be, my longing to make my mark on the world like Nellie Bly did. And when I wrote my series for boys, I wrote out of my deep love for Walter— each one of my heroes faced death and danger with the same courage and faith that he'd shown. But if I hadn't risked putting myself onto those pages, those books never would have sold. So the question is, why are you so afraid to put yourself onto the page?"

There was another long silence before Gabe replied, "I don't know why."

"What events in your life changed you the most, Gabe? Fighting in the war is one of them, I would imagine."

"Yes...but I can't write about the war. I've tried...and I just can't."

"None of us will ever be all that God wants us to be until we face our past, face the people and the events that God put in our lives that shaped us and made us who we are. But first we have to get over our anger at Him for allowing the bad things to happen. Jesus says if we ask our Father for bread, He won't give us a stone. We have to stop seeing the bad things in life as stones—they're really God's bread. They'll nourish us and help us grow if we accept them as food for our souls."

I heard shuffling sounds as Aunt Batty stood up. When she spoke again her voice came from just inside the door. I ducked down behind the grain bin, but I heard her say before she left, "Write your own story, Gabe. I guarantee it will not only be powerful, but it might help you accept your past."

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I drove the wagon into town the next day to mail the Sears order and to sell our cream and extra eggs. I stopped by Mr. Wakefield's office, too, and it was all I could do to keep from galloping the horses

home in the August heat to tell Aunt Batty the latest news. She was out in the yard, taking the laundry we had scrubbed that morning down from the clotheslines.

“Looks like you’re about to burst,” she said when she saw me. “You’ve got news, I take it—good or bad?”

“I’m not sure. I paid Mr. Wakefield a visit while I was in town. He had a court date over at the county seat so he wasn’t there, but his secretary let it slip that they might have found out where Matthew is living. The address the army hospital gave Mr. Wakefield is for a boardinghouse in Chicago. The address is thirteen years old, of course, but at least they know where to start looking.

Mr. Wakefield has people pursuing a few leads for him in Chicago and they think they’re getting close to finding Matthew. They might have some news for us in just a couple more weeks.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news!” Aunt Batty still held one end of a bed sheet that was attached to the clothesline with a pin. She got so excited that she twirled right around in a circle with it like she was dancing around a May pole. Gabe walked out of the barn just then to unhitch the wagon.

“You’re dancing, Aunt Batty. What are we celebrating this time?” he asked.

“Matthew!” she said with a grin. “We might be close to finding Matthew!”

“Who?” Gabe asked. But I saw his face. He had turned as pale as the bed sheet in Aunt Batty’s hand. He knew who Matthew was. Pretending he didn’t know was a lie, an act. I knew it was.

“Matthew Wyatt is my sister Lydia’s oldest son,” Aunt Batty told him. “He went off to fight in the Great War and never came back.”

All of a sudden I wanted to stop her. I didn’t want her to tell Gabe the rest—that Matthew owned the farm, not me. I was desperate to interrupt her, to distract her.



“Here, let me finish folding these clothes for you,” I said, taking the sheet from her hand. “It’s too hot for you to be standing around out here in the sun.” But Aunt Batty was too excited to stop. I listened helplessly as she blurted out the truth.

“We’ve been looking all over for Matthew because Frank Wyatt’s will deeded the orchard and everything else to Matthew, not to Eliza. Now it looks like we might be close to finding him at last. He’s in Chicago, of all places!”

Gabe appeared even more shaken than me. He leaned against the wagon as if he might fall over if something didn’t hold him up. Aunt Batty might have noticed it, too, if she hadn’t been so excited. But a moment later Gabe pulled himself together. In a few quick strides he stood so close to me I could smell the scent of his shaving soap on his face.

“Your father-in-law left everything to someone else?” he asked in a tight voice. “None of this belongs to you and the kids? He left you with *nothing*?”

“That’s right,” I answered, my voice barely above a whisper.

I could see Gabe’s anger building, but he didn’t seem to have anywhere to release it. His jaw tightened and his hands balled into fists.

“No wonder everyone hated Frank Wyatt,” he said through clenched teeth. “I hope he’s rotting in hell!”

“Oh, Gabe, no!” Aunt Batty said. “I wouldn’t wish hell on anyone, not even Frank Wyatt. Besides, I don’t know a single person who ever loved that man. To me, that’s hell enough. Can you imagine going through this wonderful life here on earth without ever being loved?”

I took advantage of the distraction to escape from Gabe, backing away from him and lifting the wicker laundry basket to hold between us like a shield. Without another word, he turned and strode back to the wagon, leading the horses away into the barn.

Gabe didn't seem like the same person after that day. I would catch him deep in thought at odd moments, like the time he stood on a picking ladder with an apple in his hand, just staring off into the distance, or the time I found him sitting on a milking stool beside Myrtle, staring into the empty pail while she bellowed to be milked. Most times when you tried to talk to him you got the feeling his thoughts were far away from Wyatt Orchards. Even the kids couldn't interest him in playing ball or going fishing anymore. He stayed out in the barn in the evenings instead of listening to the radio with all of us, and even Aunt Batty couldn't coax him inside.

His strange behavior made me feel like I walked a tightrope. If he really was Matthew, why didn't he just step forward and admit it? Was he trying to make up his mind what to do now that he knew everything belonged to him? And if he wasn't Matthew— well, maybe he was just trying to distance himself from us while he figured out how to say good-bye. Either way, it seemed as though we'd already lost the Gabe we once knew.

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August flew past, and by the time the boys headed back to school in September, the end of the long growing season was almost in sight. We'd worked hard and now our labor had finally paid off. The tree branches were heavy with apples. Once they were picked and sold and the corn was harvested, we would all get a much-deserved rest.

Aunt Batty and I worked in the vegetable garden one afternoon while Becky napped. We were picking the last of the green tomatoes to fry before the frost killed them when Sheriff Foster's car came up the driveway in a cloud of dust. A feeling of foreboding shivered through me, though I didn't know why.

"Uh-oh," Aunt Batty said, echoing my thoughts. "Here comes trouble."

I didn't move as the sheriff climbed from his car. He waved when he saw us, then walked across the yard to where we worked.

"I need to have a word with that so-called hired hand of yours, ma'am," he said, tipping his hat. "The one who calls himself Gabriel Harper."

"I don't care one bit for your tone of voice, Sheriff," I said, trying to sound braver than I felt. Something about his grim face and the shiny badge pinned to his uniform made my heart start to pound. "Mr. Harper has worked very hard for me. We're about to bring in the last of the harvest and I never would have been able to accomplish it all without his help."

"Well," he said with a heavy sigh, "I really don't like being the one to tell you this, but the man who calls himself Gabriel Harper has been lying to you. He's not who he claims to be...and both John Wakefield and I have reached the conclusion that Harper came here with the deliberate intention of cheating and defrauding you."

I felt my knees go weak. Gabe? Came here to defraud me? "I don't believe it," I murmured. But even as I said the words, doubt flickered in the back of my mind. I knew he had lied to me when he said that Gabe was his real name. And I knew he'd only pretended not to know who Matthew was. He'd kept a secret hidden from me since the time he'd arrived, but it couldn't possibly be because he was out to cheat me, could it? That's the part I couldn't believe.

"Well, ma'am, it's true," the sheriff said. He looked at me with pity. "I can see the man has won your affection and trust—and that makes his crime all the more reprehensible, in my judgment."

My words came out in a rush of anger. "I don't know what crime you think he has committed, but it hasn't been against me! He's done nothing wrong in all the time I've known him, nor has he tried to steal my affections." I nearly choked on the lie. Gabe *had* stolen my affections, as well as my kids' affections. Whether he'd done it

deliberately or not, I didn't know.

"Listen," I continued, "all of Gabe's actions toward me have been completely honorable! He has worked harder than any hired hand should be expected to work, and he's taken absolutely nothing from me except his meals and a bed in my barn."

"Now, calm down, Eliza. Give me a chance to tell you what John Wakefield and I have found out."

"What does Mr. Wakefield have to do with this?"

"I'm getting to that. See, after I talked to Mr. Harper some months ago, I began making inquiries in Chicago to try and look into this fellow's background."

"Why? What right did you have? What reason?"

"Let me finish." He held out his hands to quiet me. "The folks at the *Chicago Tribune* told me that 'Gabriel Harper' is a pen name he uses. But when I looked into his real identity, I found out that he claims his real name is Matthew Wyatt—same as your brother-in-law."

*Gabe really was Matthew!* A tidal wave of emotions washed over me—relief, fear, joy, disbelief. I couldn't even think about what that meant as far as the kids' and my futures were concerned. All I knew was that I'd found the very man I'd been searching for and I was in love with him and I was pretty sure he loved me. But the sheriff still acted as though he wanted to throw Gabe in jail. He delivered the news to me as if announcing some great tragedy.

"Now, John Wakefield told me that he's been trying to trace your brother-in-law's whereabouts," the sheriff continued. "I understand Matthew has an inheritance coming to him from Frank's will, isn't that right? Anyhow, Mr. Wakefield's search and my inquiries led us to this same man—this so-called Gabriel Harper."

I finally found my voice. "Is it a crime to use a pen name? If Gabe really is my brother-in-law, then that's wonderful news. And it's not against the law for him to live here and work for me, is it?"

“Eliza—that man who’s been working for you is *not* the Matthew Wyatt who grew up here in Deer Springs.”

“How do you know he isn’t? People change. He went through a war —”

“There’s a real simple way to find out. Is the tip of his right index finger missing? Nail and all? The real Matthew had an accident with a hay mower blade when he was twelve or thirteen years old. Fingers don’t grow back. John and I believe this man came here to defraud you and your children out of their rightful inheritance. You were alone, vulnerable, needing his help.”

“But Gabe didn’t even know about Frank’s will. I never told him one word about it.”

“Don’t defend him, Mrs. Wyatt. We believe he did know. This impostor, this Gabe Harper or whoever he is, knows all about the real Matthew Wyatt. John Wakefield subpoenaed his work records at the newspaper to see if he was entitled to the inheritance and found out that Harper listed his parents as Frank and Lydia Wyatt, his birthplace as Deer Springs—he even used Matthew’s real date of birth.”

Gabe knew much, much more than that. He knew all kinds of personal things, such as what kind of a father Frank Wyatt had been and the secret of how Willie had drowned. And he knew that Matthew wasn’t Frank’s real son, too. I felt as shaken as a tent in a hurricane. The sheriff must have noticed because he rested his hand on my shoulder to steady me.

“As I said, the real Matthew Wyatt has part of a finger missing. Now, if you’ll just tell me where Gabriel Harper is, you’ll see the truth for yourself.”

I already knew the truth. Gabe did not have any missing fingers. That must be how Aunt Batty knew he wasn’t Matthew, too. I turned to her—but she had disappeared! She had stood right beside me a moment ago when the sheriff pulled up—and now she was gone,

silent as a cat. I couldn't take it all in. I was so stunned to think that Gabe was a criminal who had come here to cheat me that I couldn't speak. I still couldn't believe it. The sheriff rested both hands on my shoulders as if he knew I was about to fall over.

"We know that the real Matthew Wyatt moved to Chicago after the army discharged him," he said. "The police in Chicago are very concerned because Matthew appears to be missing without a trace. Your Mr. Harper might well be connected to his disappearance. Don't protect him, Eliza. Tell me where he is."

I struggled to comprehend the sheriff's terrible words. I didn't want to believe them. Had I fallen in love with a criminal? Had I allowed my children to sit on a murderer's lap?

"Um...Gabe's in the apple barn," I finally said. "He's getting the apple grader ready to use."

I followed Sheriff Foster across the yard and into the apple barn like a woman in a dream. But when we went inside, there was no sign of Gabe. Instead, Aunt Batty stood leaning against the grader, smiling just as big as you please. Winky sat at her feet, his tongue lolling as usual.

"Where's Mr. Harper?" the sheriff asked her.

"He's not here, Dan," she said. "I'm afraid he's gone."

The sheriff pushed past her and ran out the open rear door.

I gaped at Aunt Batty in disbelief. "You warned him, didn't you?"

"Yes, Gabe asked me to. Remember when he was working down at my house, and Dan Foster threatened to check up on him? Gabe made me promise that if the sheriff ever came back looking for him I would come and tell him right away."

"But why? What secret is Gabe hiding?"

She shrugged. "I didn't ask him. I just warned him that Sheriff Foster was here, like I promised I would, and Gabe bolted."

The sheriff returned just then, puffing slightly. "I hope you believe

me now, Mrs. Wyatt. Innocent men don't run from the law. May I borrow your telephone? I'm sending for the dogs."

"I don't have a telephone."

He huffed in frustration. "Who's your nearest neighbor? Does Alvin Greer have one?"

"You don't need to send for your dogs," Aunt Batty said. "My Winky is an excellent hunting dog. Just give him something of Gabe's and he'll be hot on his trail in no time." Winky barked in agreement.

The sheriff looked at the fat little dog and frowned skeptically. "Miss Fowler...I really don't think—"

"Try it, Sheriff. Look, here's Gabe's bandana." She held it close to Winky's nose. He sniffed the cloth as if his life depended on it. "Find Gabe, boy! Go get Gabe!" she coaxed.

I'd never seen the little dog get so excited before. He barked as if he wanted to tell us something important, and his stubby tail whirled in circles.

"Go get him!" Aunt Batty urged again. "Find Gabe!"

Winky put his nose to the ground and led the way, waddling out of the back door of the apple barn on his short, bowed legs. I knew he really had sniffed out Gabe's trail because he trotted toward the barn in a straight line, not in the usual drunken, zigzag pattern his blind eye always caused him to take. I wanted to stop him but I didn't know how—or why. If Gabe was really the criminal Sheriff Foster claimed he was, why did I still want to protect him?

Winky led us to the workshop where Gabe slept. He pushed the door open with his snout, then jumped up on Gabe's bed and barked.

"He's not here," the sheriff said in disgust.

"No, but I'll bet he was just here," Aunt Batty said. "This is where Gabe's been living, and see? His typewriter and all his other belongings are gone."

I couldn't understand what Aunt Batty was doing. Why would she

warn Gabe one minute and betray him the next?

The sheriff pointed to the clothes that lay neatly folded on a chair. “Aren’t these his clothes? He wouldn’t have gone far without these.”

“They belonged to Sam,” I said. “I loaned them to Gabe because he didn’t have much to wear. He left them here because he isn’t a thief.”

“But he wore them recently, so they’ll still have Gabe’s scent,” Aunt Batty said helpfully. She held one of the shirts near Winky’s snout and the little dog grew excited all over again. He barked, then jumped off the bed and followed Gabe’s trail out the back door of the barn. He led us down the path the cows always took to get to the pasture, then ducked under the barbed-wire fence and into the woods. Aunt Batty and I easily climbed between the wires, but it took Sheriff Foster a little longer to maneuver through the barbed wire without ripping his pants. Winky came back and waited patiently for him on the other side.

“Didn’t I tell you he was a fine hunting dog, Sheriff?” Aunt Batty said proudly.

Winky barked again and took off into the underbrush. He led us to a thicket of dense weeds and fallen branches deep in the woods.

“That looks like some sort of a nest, all right,” the sheriff said, resting his hand on his holster. “And I’ll bet he’s hiding in there. Stand back everyone.”

Suddenly Winky barked three times, then took off toward home faster than I’d ever seen him run. Aunt Batty clutched the sheriff’s arm. “Wait a minute, Dan. I wouldn’t go poking around in there if I were you, because—”

“I said stand back, Miss Fowler. Harper knows he’s cornered and he might be dangerous.”

“But I think you should know that Winky has made a dreadful mistake and—”

“I want both of you to step back and stop interfering with this



arrest,” he said firmly. He pointed back down the path to a large pine tree. “Go stand over there, out of my way.”

“We’d better do what the man says,” Aunt Batty said with a shrug.

“But is Gabe—?”

“Trust me, Toots.” She pulled me back down the path and we stood beneath the pine tree, waiting. Sheriff Foster pulled out his gun.

“Come on out of there, Harper,” he yelled. “I know you’re in there. You can’t escape.” When nothing happened, he picked up a dead tree branch and poked it into the thicket. “Don’t make this any harder on yourself by resisting arrest.”

He poked again, deeper, and I heard a rustling in the thicket. From the safe distance where Aunt Batty had dragged me I saw movement. A thatch of dark hair emerged, then Sheriff Foster let out a yell. At the same instant that he yelled, the powerful stench of skunk overwhelmed all of us.

“Ugh! I tried to warn him,” Aunt Batty said, shaking her head.

I did feel sorry for Sheriff Foster. The stink was so nauseating it took your breath away and made your eyes water—and the skunk had sprayed him at close range before running off into the woods. The sheriff couldn’t stop coughing and gagging, and we had to lead him back to the house since his eyes stung so badly he couldn’t see.

When we reached the back porch I gave him a basin of water to rinse out his eyes, but I had no intention of inviting him into my house, smelling like he did.

“We can drag out the copper bathtub for you,” Aunt Batty offered. “I’ll fix you a bath of tomato juice. That’s guaranteed to take away the stench.”

“No...no...” he said, still sputtering.

“Well, at least let me give you a change of clothes,” I said. But he couldn’t get into his car and drive away fast enough.

“He should have listened to me,” Aunt Batty said as the sheriff

roared out of the driveway. Then, before the dust even had a chance to settle she burst into laughter as if she'd held it inside for so long she either had to laugh or explode. I stared at her.

“You led him to that skunk on purpose, didn't you!”

“I didn't do anything,” she said as innocently as a child. “Winky did it.”

“But—”

She patted my arm. “Winky thought the world of Gabe, you know.”

# DEEL VII

## Wyatt-boorde

*Herfs 1931*

Ek sal die reën van julle land gee op die regte tyd, vroeë reëns  
en laat reëns, sodat jy jou koring en jou mos en jou olie kan insamel.  
En Ek sal plante gee op jou veld vir jou vee, en jy sal eet en versadig word.

Deuteronomium 11:14-15, 1953-vertaling

## ~ Hoofstuk veertien ~

“Dokter Gilbert het hom natuurlik deur niemand laat flous nie,” sê tannie Batty toe sy haar verhaal afsluit.

“Hy het daarop aangedring dat dit soos ’n poging tot moord en selfmoord lyk, en hy was reg. Hy en Frank het ’n lelike uitval gehad as gevolg daarvan. Die redakteur van die *Deer Springs News* was op die punt om die dokter se vermoedens op die voorblad te plaas toe Frank daarvan uitvind en dreig om hom vir laster te dagvaar. Die koerant het geen bewyse gehad om daardie aanklagte te bevestig nie, het Frank gesê. Geen moordwapen is ooit gevind nie, geen selfmoordbriefie nie, en Frank het onder eed getuig oor wat regtig gebeur het.”

“Het die redakteur toe die storie geplaas?” vra ek. Ek en tannie Batty sit op een van die smal houtbeddens in die plukkers se kwartiere met die skoon hooi nog steeds voor ons in die kruiwa. Nie een van ons het enige werk gedoen terwyl sy haar tragiese verhaal vertel het nie.

“Nee, die koerant het eerder kop uitgetrek as om in ’n hofsak betrokke te raak wat hulle nie kon wen nie. Die amptelike verhaal sal altyd wees dat Frank Wyatt homself per ongeluk gestee het terwyl hy ’n skroefboor skerpmaak het. Toe sy geweldig ontstelde vrou gaan hulp soek het, het sy in die donker haar rigting verloor, deur die dun ys geval en in die dam verdrink.”

Ek probeer uitpluis wat dit alles vir my en my kinders beteken, maar ek kan nie helder dink nou dat ek van al die aaklige geheime weet wat in hierdie familie se verlede skuil nie.

Die klein vertrek laat my skielik benoud voel. Ek staan van die bed af op en maak ’n venster oop om die vars lug in te laat.

“Dink jy Lydia het Frank se testament verander voordat sy hom probeer doodmaak het?” vra ek toe ek weer langs tannie Batty gaan sit.

“Wel, as Matthew volgens Frank se testament enigiets erf ... dan, ja. Ek dink sy moes die twee omgeruil het. Lydia het vir my gesê sy het die ou een in die asblik gekry. Dit is dalk wat sy bedoel het toe sy gesê het sy het alles reggemaak sodat Matthew kan terugkom huis toe.”

“Waarom het Frank dit dan nooit agtergekom nie?”

Tannie Batty trek haar skouers op. “Hoe dikwels gaan iemand deur sy eie rekords en lees weer sy eie testament? Frank het geglo die ou een is weggegooi en die nuwe een geld in die plek daarvan. Hy het gedink Sam sal

alles erf.”

’n Ligte bries waai by die vertrek in en bring die soet reuk van vars strooi saam. Vandat ek die nuus oor Frank se testament by meneer Wakefield gehoor het, voel ek vir die eerste keer ’n tikkie hoop.

“Tannie Batty, sal Tannie saam met my dorp toe kom en aan meneer Wakefield verduidelik wat regtig gebeur het? Hy onthou dalk nog dat hy die tweede testament opgestel het. Hy sal dalk kan sien dat die ou een opgefrommel was en toe weer platgestryk is, of iets.”

“Ek sou nie te veel hoop nie, Toots,” sê sy en vou my hand tussen hare toe. “Frank het doodseker gemaak hy begrawe die waarheid saam met Lydia. Niemand sal ons ooit glo nie, want niemand het ooit uitgevind dat Matthew nie Frank se eie seun is nie. Ons is net Frank se mal ou skoonsuster en sy skoon dogter wat alles vir haarself wil hê. As dit boonop die enigste amptelike testament is wat ooit gekry is, en as dit wettig onderteken en deur getuienis gestaaf is, is daar regtig niks wat meneer Wakefield kan doen behalwe om dit te laat geld nie.”

“Ek moet dus wag totdat hulle vir Matthew opspoor?”

“Ek dink dit is die verstandige ding om te doen.”

“Maar wat sal Matthew doen? Die boord is in sy naam. Dink Tannie hy sal dit van ons af wegvat?”

“Ek weet regtig nie,” sê sy met ’n sug. “Dit hang af van hoeveel Matthew die afgelope veertien jaar verander het en wat hy al die tyd met homself aangevang het. Hy was eens op ’n tyd lief vir hierdie plek ... maar hy was lief vir Sam ook. Dalk stem hy in dat die twee van julle die plek deel.”

Sy buk af en tel die halfvol sloop op wat ons daar laat lê het. Sy hou dit oop en ek gryp ’n groot handvol strooi en druk dit binne-in. As ek maar net met sekerheid kon weet of Gabe regtig Matthew is. As ek maar net geweet het wat om te doen.

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Dit is skielik midsomer en dinge raak so besig in die boord dat ek nie juis tyd het om my oor Matthew Wyatt te bekommer nie. Die plukkers wat altyd vir Frank gehelp het, kom terug om die Montgomery-kersies te oes – en later die perskes en pere en appels – maar daar is hierdie jaar soveel mense wat sonder werk sit dat ek elke oggend ’n klomp ander mense kry wat in ’n ry staan en smee om vir my kersies te pluk. Sommige van die stadsmense sê hulle sal vir ’n beker melk of ’n dosyn eiers werk – enigiets, solank hulle net hul families

kan kos gee. Ek dank die goeie Here dat my kinders altyd genoeg sal hê om te eet vir so lank as wat ons op 'n plaas bly.

Gabe doen goeie werk terwyl hy 'n ogie oor al die werkers hou; hy leer die nuweling hoe om te pluk en los ook die rusies op wat tussen hulle en die gereelde plukkers uitbreek. Hy sit vir my 'n tafel aan die einde van een van die rye neer en tannie Batty wys my hoe om rekord te hou van elke persoon se naam en die hoeveelheid emmers wat hulle gepluk het sodat ek hulle aan die einde van die dag kan betaal. Ons gooi alles wat die dag gepluk is in groot vate en laai dit op die wa. Dan ry ek en Gabe vroeg die volgende oggend met die wa en perde na die opelugmark om ons kersies te verkoop.

Ek was nog nooit voorheen by die opelugmark nie. Ons kyk wat al die ander boere doen, val dan in die tou en betaal ons registrasiegeld sodat ons ook op die mark kan verkoop. Die kopers wat na ons kersies kom kyk, lyk vasbeslote om so min moontlik te betaal en blameer die prys op die ekonomiese depressie. Gabe weier egter om bes te gee en namate meer boere met hulle vrugte opdaag, word ons stadigaan opsy geskuif sonder om iets te verkoop. Ek begin bekommerd raak.

“Aanvaar hulle prys, Gabe. Dis die beste wat ons kan doen.”

“Nee, ek sal nie toelaat dat hulle jou kul nie.” Gabe lyk net so hardvogtig en onversetlik soos al die ander boere; 'n heeltemal ander mens as die sagmoedige Gabe wat ek leer ken het. “Dit is vrugte van die beste gehalte en hulle almal weet dit. Ons kan dit waarskynlik op die groter vrugtemark verkoop vir die prys wat hierdie ouens aanbied. Ek dink ons moet vasbyt.”

Ons is byna uit die ry en van die mark af toe een van die kopers uiteindelik instem om Gabe se prys te betaal. Verligting spoel deur my toe ons na die koper se stalletjie ry en die balies op sy platform aflaai. Ek voel uitgeput en dit is maar net my eerste kersieoes, my eerste dag op die mark. Ek moet nog die res van die seisoen se vrugte verkoop.

“Ek is nie seker dat my senuwees hierdie gekibbel oor pryse kan hanteer nie,” sê ek vir Gabe terwyl ons met die leë wa huis toe ry. “Ek is nie gemaak om 'n pokerspeler te wees nie.”

Gabe lag. “Jy sal gewoon raak daaraan. Die geheim is om nie te gretig te lyk om te verkoop nie. Maak of dit jou min skeel of hulle dit nou vat of los.”

“Wel, jy was beslis 'n goeie akteur.” Ek hou my oë op die pad voor ons, bang om na Gabe te kyk, wetend dat hy my dophou. “Met al daardie hoeihaai klink jy meer na iemand wat koerante verkoop as na 'n skrywer.”

“'n Joernalis moet soms 'n bietjie hoeihaai gebruik as hy soos ek vryskutwerk doen. Redakteurs kan baie soos vrugtekopers wees: Waarom die beste moontlike prys vir 'n storie betaal as jy dit vir 'n bietjie minder kan

kyr?” Gabe skuif op die bankie langs my rond en ek voel hoe sy been teen myne skuur.

“Wel, jy het vir ons ’n goeie prys gekry. Ek is dankbaar. Ek wil hê jy moet van hierdie geld vat as jou betaling.”

“Nee, hou dit. Ek wil nie geld hê nie. Ek betaal jou nog terug omdat jy my lewe gered het.”

Ek kyk na hom, dan weer vinnig weg. “Gabe, jy het daardie skuld lankal terugbetaal.”

“Wel, dit voel nie vir my so nie. Ek skuld jou nog baie.”

Sy hardkoppigheid frustreer my. “Luister, dit is nie reg dat jy die hele tyd so hard werk vir geen vergoeding nie.”

“Ek sou nie sê ek word glad nie vergoed nie,” sê hy en klink nou self knorrig. “Behalwe vir die feit dat jy my lewe gered het, moet jy nie vergeet dat ek nog die hele tyd verniet bly en eet nie, en dit terwyl daar soveel ander mans is wat nie werk het nie.”

“Wees tog redelik, Gabe – ”

“Ek is redelik! Jy is die een wat onredelik is. Jy – ” Gabe bly skielik stil. Hy skud sy kop en lag sag.

“Wat is so snaaks?” vra ek.

“Wanneer dit kom by ‘so hardkoppig soos ’n esel wees’, soos jy dit eenkeer genoem het, sou ek sê ons is nogal gelyk – ek en jy.”

Hy sê die laaste woorde baie sag – ek en jy – asof dit heilig is of iets. Ek kan aan sy stem agterkom dat hy na my kyk, maar ek hou my kop af en konsentreer op die perde se agterstewes hier voor my. Ons sit langs mekaar op die wa se bankie, gevaarlik naby, en ek weet as ek nou in sy oë kyk, sal ek hom weer wil soen – en dan sal ek verlore wees. Winky kan nie hierdie keer kom om my te red nie. Hoe kan ek iemand só liefhê, maar terselfdertyd ook bang wees vir hom?

“Hoekom is jy so bang vir my?” vra Gabe skielik. Hy kon my gedagtes lees en dit maak my selfs nog banger. “Het iemand jou dan so verskriklik seergemaak, Eliza?”

Ek besef ek is vasgekeer alleen saam met Gabe; die presiese ding wat ek die hele somer lank probeer keer het. Ek wil nie my hart teenoor hom oopmaak nie, maar ek het geen weggomkans nie. Ons is nog ’n ver ent van die huis af. Ek klap die teuels sodat die perde begin draf.

“Nee,” antwoord ek uiteindelik. “Ek het jou reeds gesê hoekom ... Ek weet niks van jou af nie.”

“Dis seker so, maar ek weet ook nie baie van jou af nie.” Daar is skielik ’n hardheid in sy stem, iets wat ek nog nie voorheen gehoor het nie. My hart

klop skielik bang. “Moet ons nie maar alles vertel wat daar te vertelle is nie, Eliza? Wat wil jy graag weet? Waar ek my kinderjare deurgebring het? Albany, New York. Goed, waar het jy jou kinderjare deurgebring?”

Ek is bang om te antwoord; bang om dit nie te doen nie. “Nie op een plek nie,” sê ek uiteindelik en sluk swaar. “Ek het die wêreld vol saam met my pappa gereis ... as gevolg van sy werk.”

“Wel, dit verduidelik waarom jy nie weet hoe om bofbal te speel nie.” Sy stemtoon is so kil dat ek hard teen die trane moet stry. “Watter soort werk het jou pa gedoen?” gaan hy voort. “Was hy dalk ’n rondreisende verkoopsman? My pa was ’n prokureur. Om die waarheid te sê, ’n baie belangrike prokureur.”

“Hoekom tree jy nou so op?” vra ek en sluk steeds die trane weg.

“Want ek gee om vir jou, Eliza, en ek dink jy gee vir my ook om. Ek wil weet waarom jy aanhou om my weg te stoot. Jy sê dit is omdat jy niks omtrent my weet nie, maar jy weet baie van my. Ons werk al byna ses maande saam, jy praat elke dag met my, jy sien hoe ek jou en die kinders behandel. Wat meer wil jy weet?”

“Is Gabe Harper jou regte naam?” blaker ek dit uit.

My vraag vang hom onkant. Hy aarsel net ’n oomblik te lank.

“Ja.”

Ek weet hy jok. Ek weet dit.

Ek bring die perde tot stilstand en gooi die teuels vir hom. Dan staan ek op om af te klim. Gabe gryp my aan die arm om my te keer. “Wat doen jy? Waarheen gaan jy?”

“Ek wil net ’n entjie stap, as jy nie omgee nie.”

Hy trek my hard aan die arm sodat ek weer moet gaan sit. “As enigiemand moet loop, sal dit ek wees,” sê hy en druk die teuels in my hande. Voordat ek hom kan keer, spring hy tot op die grond en begin voor my in die pad af stap. Hy loop effens mank, net soos ek hom gewaarsku het.

Ek pluk aan die teuels en praat met die perde sodat hulle begin draf. ’n Oomblik later steek ek Gabe verby en los hom agter my in die pad.

Van toe af gaan Gabe alleen na die opelugmark of die vrugtemark. Hy hou nie van my besluit nie, maar ek dring daarop aan dat een van ons by die huis moet bly om ’n ogie oor die plukkers te hou, en hy stem uiteindelik in. Partykeer ry Jimmy en Luke saam met hom, maar net wanneer hulle klaar die onkruid in die groentetuin vir tannie Batty uitgetrek het. Sy het regte groen vingers wanneer dit by die kweek van groente kom en sy het ’n baie groot oes met haar somergroente ingebring. Gabe vat sommige daarvan in dorp toe om te verkoop, maar tannie Batty gee baie daarvan sommer net weg. Ek gee nie



om nie. Ons het baie meer as wat ons ooit kan gebruik.

Dié somer help tannie Batty my met die inmaakproses. Ek raak so gewoond daaraan om te hoor hoe sy haar gesange uit volle bors sing, dat ek so af en toe saam met haar en Becky sing. Tannie Batty het my dogter op 'n manier oortuig dat dit pret is om aarbeie te was, tamaties te skil en komkommers in te lê; dus het ons 'n ekstra paar gewillige hande. Een middag giggel die drie van ons soos skoolmeisies terwyl ons perskes inlê, en sonder om te dink gryp ek vier perskes en begin dit in die lug gooi en vang om te kyk of ek nog onthou hoe om dit te doen. Becky staar stomverbaas na my.

“Mamma! Hoe kry Mamma dit reg?”

Tannie Batty kyk van haar pot kokende stroop af op en klap hande. “My aarde, Eliza. Ons het nie geweet jy is so talentvol nie.”

Ek vang die vier perskes vinnig en sit dit op die tafel neer, kwaad omdat ek sommerso 'n geheime deel van myself blootgelê het.

“Doen dit weer, Mamma.”

Ek kan nie na Becky kyk nie. “Nie nou nie. Ons het werk om te doen.”

“Wag tot ek vir Jimmy en Luke en meneer Harper vertel wat jy kan doen.”

“Nee! Jy sal nie 'n woord hieroor sê nie, Becky Jean. Ek sal dit nie weer doen nie; nie vir hulle of enigiemand anders nie.”

My woorde kom harder uit as wat ek dit bedoel het. Becky se onderlip bewe terwyl sy teen haar trane stry. “Hoekom nie, Mamma?”

“Want ... Sommer net.” Ek het dit altyd gehaat as my pa vir my dié antwoord gegee het, en nou sê ek presies dieselfde ding. Daar is egter sekere goed wat ek eenvoudig nie aan 'n vierjarige kan verduidelik nie.

Ons lê ongeveer sestien bottels perskes in en bêre dit in my kelder op die rakke. Dit laat my altyd trots voel om die rye tuisgemaakte produkte op die rakke te sien staan – tamaties, groenbone, agurkies, perskes, pere en rye kleurvolle konfyt en jellie – kos wat my familie in die wintermaande sal voed.

Tannie Batty koop vir Jimmy en Luke met haar Herman Walters-avontuurverhale om en kry hulle om allerhande werkies te doen, soos om die kunsmisstrooier tussen die rye mielies deur te stoot en die buitenste kelder skoon te maak. Ons sal binnekort dié kelder vul met aartappels, uie, wortels, pampoen, beet en rape. Die twee varke wat sy gekoop het, is nou lekker vet en ryk room van Myrtle se melk het vir ons ekstra geld verdien deurdat ons dit aan die suiwelfabriek in die dorp verkoop het. Die geld het ons gehelp om al die noodsaaklikhede te koop wat ons nie self kan plant nie, soos koffie, bakpoeier, meel en suiker. Baie mense ly dié jaar honger, maar die goeie Here seën ons met oorvloed, en tannie Batty maak seker ons almal dank Hom elke aand wanneer die ses van ons by die tafel sit vir ete.

In Augustus kry ons die nuwe Sears, Roebuck & Co.-katalogus. In beter tye het ek altyd vir die seuns nuwe skoolklere bestel en die vorige jaar se skoolklere het dan speelklere geword. Hierdie jaar is die geld egter te skraps. Die seuns sal in September maar tevrede moet wees met gelapte klere en dié wat hulle by ander mense gekry het. Hulle sal beslis nie die enigste kinders by die skool wees wie se enkels by hulle langbroeke uitsteek nie. Ons moet ons geld spaar om 'n vrag steenkool te koop om ons deur die winter te kry en om volgende lente die spuitstof by Merle Peterson se winkel te koop aangesien hy dit nie vir my op rekening wil gee nie. Gabe gee vir my 'n lys van plaasbenodigdhede waarsonder ons nie kan klaarkom nie en die enigste ander ding wat ek dié jaar by Sears bestel, is nuwe skoene vir Jimmy om dié te vervang wat nou vir hom te klein is.

Ek het pas een aand die bestelvorm by die kombuistafel ingevul en die totaal uitgewerk toe dit my skielik byval dat tannie Batty dalk iets wil byvoeg. Ek gaan soek haar in die voorkamer waar al drie kinders by die radio na *Amos 'n Andy* sit en luister. Sy is nie daar nie.

“Waar is tannie Batty?” Ek moet omtrent skree voordat hulle my hoor. “Hei daar! Het julle vir tannie Batty gesien?” Dit is of hulle almal gehipnotiseer is. Ek wonder of dit goed is vir my kinders om na die radio te luister.

“Ek dink sy is buite by meneer Harper,” antwoord Jimmy uiteindelik.

Ek sien geen teken van haar op die werf nie. Toe ek by die skuur ingaan, hoor ek stemme vanuit die werkswinkel kom waar Gabe slaap. Hy het die deur op 'n skrefie oopgelos. Ek weet dit is verkeerd om af te luister, maar ek kan die versoeking nie weerstaan nie. Ek wil hoor waaroor sy en Gabe gesels.

“Nee, moenie my gevoelens spaar nie, tannie Batty,” sê Gabe. “Ek het vir Tannie se eerlike opinie gevra. Ek wil hoor wat Tannie regtig daarvan dink.”

“Ek dink dit is 'n baie goeie verhaal,” sê sy. “En baie veilig.”

“Veilig? Wat bedoel Tannie?”

“Is dit die tipe goed wat jy gewoonlik skryf? Koerantartikels soos dié?”

“Ja. Hoekom?”

“Hierdie artikel is baie goed geskryf, baie leersaam ... maar sonder passie,” sê tannie Batty. “Dit is goed vir koerantartikels, want dit is wat daarvan verwag word. Ek het jou die afgelope ruk egter goed leer ken, Gabe, en jy is 'n baie sensitiewe, oplettende man in staat tot diep gevoelens. Waarom kom die ware Gabe Harper nie in jou skryfwerk na vore nie? Jy is tog nie 'n man met geen passie nie.”

“Tannie sê tog self dit is nie wat van 'n goeie koerantartikel verwag word nie. Ek skryf nie fiksie of essays – ”

“Hoekom nie?”

“Wel ... want ... Ek doen net nie.”

“Word kwaad, Gabe. Raak opgewonde, raak hartstogtelik. Al die werklik goeie skrywers was nog nooit bang om hulle gevoelens, hulle ware self, in hulle werk uit te stort nie. Ek dink dit geld vir elke beroep. Dit is waarom John Wakefield so ’n goeie prokureur is ... Dit is wat Eliza moes leer om van hierdie boord ’n sukses te maak. Goeie skrywers hou nie ’n deel van hulleself terug nie. Tog dink ek jy hou iets terug, Gabe.”

“Hoekom sê Tannie so?”

“Daar is niks van jou eie ervarings in wat jy skryf nie, net jou onpartydige waarnemings. Jy moet jouself op die bladsy sit.”

Daar is ’n lang stilte. Ek wonder wat hulle doen.

“Dié idee maak jou om die een of ander rede doodbang, nè?” sê tannie Batty uiteindelik. “Ek kan dit in jou oë sien.”

“Ja, ek erken dat dit my bang maak.”

Ek onthou hoe goed Gabe se storie oor die boemelaars was; tog het ek niks van hom geleer toe ek dit gelees het nie. Die stories wat Gabe egter oor sy pa en jonger broer geskryf het wat deur die ys geval het – dié stories dra die gevoel oor waarna ek dink tannie Batty nou verwys. Hy het haar seker nie daardie stories laat lees nie, en ek dink ek weet hoekom.

“Weet jy waarom my boeke so gewild was?” vra tannie Batty. “Toe ek my reeks vir meisies geskryf het, het ek teruggedink aan my eie verlange om soos Nellie Bly te wees en toe het ek uit my eie siel geput. Ek het geskryf oor die begeerte wat ek gehad het om my eie mens te wees, nie net iemand se dogter of vrou nie; my begeerte om die regte keuses te maak en te wees wat God my geskep het om te wees; my begeerte om soos Nellie Bly my merk in die lewe te maak. Toe ek my reeks vir seuns geskryf het, het ek vanuit my diep liefde vir Walter geskryf – elkeen van my helde het die dood en gevaar met dieselfde moed en geloof trotseer as wat hy gehad het. As ek dit egter nie gewaag het om myself op daardie bladsye te sit nie, sou die boeke nooit verkoop het nie. Die vraag is dus: Waarom is jy so bang om jouself op die bladsy te sit?”

Daar is nog ’n lang stilte voordat Gabe antwoord: “Ek weet nie hoekom nie.”

“Watter gebeure in jou lewe het jou die meeste verander, Gabe? Ek sou raai om in die oorlog te veg is een daarvan.”

“Ja ... maar ek kan nie oor die oorlog skryf nie. Ek het probeer ... en ek kan eenvoudig nie.”

“Niemand van ons sal ooit wees wat God wil hê ons moet wees totdat ons

ons verlede in die oë kyk, die mense en die gebeure trotseer wat God in ons lewe geplaas het en wat ons gevorm en gemaak het wie ons vandag is nie. Tog moet ons eers verby ons woede teenoor Hom kom omdat Hy toegelaat het dat slegte dinge gebeur. Jesus sê as ons die Vader vir brood vra, sal Hy nie vir ons 'n klip gee nie. Ons moet ophou om die slegte dinge in die lewe as klippe te sien terwyl dit in werklikheid God se brood is. Dit sal ons voed en help groei indien ons dit as kos vir ons siel aanvaar.”

Ek hoor skuifgeluide toe tannie Batty opstaan. Toe sy weer praat, klink haar stem vanuit die deur op. Ek kruip agter die graankis weg, maar voordat sy uitgaan, hoor ek haar sê: “Skryf jou eie verhaal, Gabe. Ek kan jou belowe dit sal nie net kragtig wees nie, maar dit kan jou dalk ook help om jou verlede te aanvaar.”

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Ek ry die volgende dag met die wa in dorp toe om die Sears-bestelling te pos en ons room en ekstra eiers te verkoop. Ek gaan maak ook 'n draai by meneer Wakefield se kantoor en ná die tyd moet ek myself keer voordat ek die perde te vinnig in die Augustus-hitte aanjaag om die jongste nuus met tannie Batty te deel. Sy is buite op die werf besig om die oggend se wasgoed van die draad af te haal.

“Dit lyk of jy gaan bars,” sê sy toe sy my sien. “Ek aanvaar jy het nuus. Is dit goed of sleg?”

“Ek is nie seker nie. Ek het gou by meneer Wakefield 'n draai gaan maak toe ek in die dorp was. Hy moes in die hof in die distrikshoofstad wees, so hy was nie daar nie, maar sy sekretaresse het laat blyk dat hulle dalk uitgevind het waar Matthew bly. Die adres wat die weermaghospitaal vir meneer Wakefield gegee het, is vir 'n losieshuis in Chicago. Die adres is natuurlik dertien jaar oud, maar ten minste weet hulle nou waar om te begin soek. Meneer Wakefield het 'n paar mense wat vir hom leidrade in Chicago opvolg en hulle dink hulle is baie naby daaraan om vir Matthew te kry. Hulle sal dalk oor 'n paar weke vir ons nuus hê.”

“O, dit is wonderlike nuus.” Tannie Batty hou nog steeds die een punt van 'n laken vas wat met 'n pennetjie aan die draad vas is. Sy raak so opgewonde dat sy in die rondte draai daarmee, asof sy om 'n paal dans. Op daardie oomblik kom Gabe by die skuur uit om die perde uit te span.

“Tannie Batty dans al weer. Wat vier ons hierdie keer?” vra hy.

“Matthew!” sê sy glimlaggend. “Ons is naby daaraan om hom op te spoor.”

“Wie?” vra Gabe. Maar ek sien sy gesig. Hy is skielik net so spierwit soos die laken in tannie Batty se hand. Hy weet wie Matthew is. Om te maak of hy nie weet nie, is ’n leuen, toneelspel. Ek weet dit is.

“Matthew Wyatt is my suster, Lydia, se oudste seun,” sê tannie Batty vir hom. “Hy is weg om in die Groot Oorlog te gaan veg en het nooit teruggekom nie.”

Ek wil haar skielik keer. Ek wil nie hê sy moet vir Gabe die res vertel nie – dat die plaas aan Matthew behoort en nie aan my nie. Ek is desperaat om haar in die rede te val, haar aandag af te trek.

“Kom, laat ek die klere klaar opvou,” sê ek en vat die laken uit haar hand uit. “Dit is te warm vir Tannie om hier buite in die son te staan.” Tannie Batty is egter te opgewonde om op te hou. Ek luister hulpeloos terwyl sy die waarheid uitblaker.

“Ons soek nou al lank na Matthew, want volgens Frank Wyatt se testament behoort die boord en die res van die plaas nou aan Matthew, en nie aan Eliza nie. Nou lyk dit of ons baie naby daaraan is om hom uiteindelik op te spoor. Hy is in Chicago, van alle plekke.”

Gabe lyk meer geskok as ek. Hy leun teen die wa asof hy gaan omval as iets hom nie regop hou nie. As tannie Batty nie so opgewonde was nie, sou sy dit dalk ook agtergekom het. ’n Oomblik later ruk Gabe homself reg. Met net ’n paar lang treë staan hy so naby aan my dat ek die reuk van sy skeerseep aan sy gesig kan ruik.

“Het jou skoonpa alles vir iemand anders gelos?” vra hy gespanne. “Behoort niks hiervan aan jou en die kinders nie? Het hy jou met niks gelos?”

“Dis reg,” antwoord ek, my stem skaars meer as ’n fluistering.

Ek kan sien hoe Gabe se woede groei, maar dit lyk nie of hy ’n uitlaatklep daarvoor het nie. Hy byt op sy tande en bal sy vuiste.

“Geen wonder almal het vir Frank Wyatt gehaat nie,” sê hy tussen sy tande deur. “Ek hoop hy vrot in die hel.”

“O, Gabe, nee,” sê tannie Batty. “Ek sal niemand die hel toewens nie, nie eens Frank Wyatt nie. Ek ken in elk geval nie ’n enkele mens wat ooit lief was vir daardie man nie. Vir my is dit hel genoeg. Kan jy jou dit indink om deur hierdie wonderlike lewe op die aarde te gaan sonder dat iemand jou ooit liefhet?”

Ek benut die afleiding om van Gabe af weg te kom. Ek staan agteruit en tel die wasgoedmandjie op sodat dit soos ’n skild tussen ons is. Sonder ’n verdere woord draai hy om en stap terug wa toe waar hy die perde uitspan en hulle dan skuur toe lei.

Daarná is Gabe nie meer dieselfde mens nie. Ek sal hom op vreemde tye

diep ingedagte sien sit, soos die keer toe hy op die leer staan met 'n appel in sy hand terwyl hy die verte in staar, of die keer toe ek hom kry waar hy op die melkstoeltjie langs Myrtle sit en na die leë emmer staar terwyl sy bulk om gemelk te word. Die meeste van die tyd wanneer ek met hom probeer praat, kry ek die gevoel dat sy gedagtes ver van Wyatt-boorde af is. Selfs die kinders kan hom nie meer oorreed om bal te speel of te gaan visvang nie. Hy bly in die aande buite in die skuur in plaas daarvan om saam met die res van ons radio te luister, en selfs tannie Batty kan hom nie oorreed om in te kom nie.

Sy vreemde optrede laat dit vir my voel of ek op eiers loop. As hy regtig Matthew is, waarom erken hy dit dan nie net nie? Probeer hy besluit wat hy gaan doen noudat hy weet alles behoort aan hom? En as hy nie Matthew is nie ... Wel, dalk probeer hy homself net van ons distansieer terwyl hy aan 'n manier dink om ons te groet. Hoe ook al, dit lyk of ons reeds die Gabe verloor het wat ons vroeër geken het.

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Augustus vlieg verby en teen die tyd dat die seuns in September teruggaan skool toe is die einde van 'n lang groeiseisoen byna in sig. Ons het hard gewerk en nou het ons arbeid uiteindelik vrugte afgewerp. Die appels hang swaar aan die takke. Sodra dit gepluk en verkoop en die mielie-oes ingebring is, sal ons almal 'n welverdiende ruskans kry.

Ek en tannie Batty werk een middag in die groentetuin terwyl Becky slaap. Ons pluk die laaste groen tamaties om te braai voordat die ryp dit vernietig toe sheriff Foster se kar in 'n stofwolk in die pad aankom. 'n Nare voorgevoel daal oor my neer, al weet ek nie hoekom nie.

“O nee,” sê tannie Batty en eggo my gedagtes. “Hier kom moeilikheid.”

Ek bly doodstil staan toe die sheriff uit sy kar uit klim. Hy waai toe hy ons sien en stap dan oor die werf aan na waar ons besig is.

“Ek moet met daardie sogenaamde bestuurder van jou praat, Mevrouw,” sê hy toe hy sy hoed lig. “Die een wat homself Gabriel Harper noem.”

“Ek hou glad nie van jou stemtoon nie, Sheriff,” sê ek en probeer dapperder klink as wat ek voel. Iets omtrent sy streng gesig en die blink kenteken teen sy bruin uniform laat my hart bang klop. “Meneer Harper het die afgelope ruk baie hard vir my gewerk. Ons staan op die punt om die laaste deel van die oes in te bring en ek sou dit nooit sonder sy hulp kon regkry nie.”

“Wel,” sê hy en sug swaar, “ek hou regtig nie daarvan om die een te wees wat dit vir jou moet sê nie, maar die man wat homself Gabriel Harper noem,

jok nog die hele tyd vir jou. Hy is nie wie hy voorgee om te wees nie ... en beide ek en John Wakefield het tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat Harper hierheen gekom het met die doelbewuste voorneme om jou te beroof en te bedrieg.”

Ek voel hoe my bene lam word. Gabe? Hierheen gekom om my te bedrieg? “Ek glo dit nie,” sê ek sag, maar die oomblik toe ek die woorde sê, flikker twyfel in my agterkop. Ek weet hy het vir my gekok toe hy gesê het Gabe is sy regte naam. Ek weet ook hy het net gemaak of hy nie weet wie Matthew is nie. Hy steek iets vir my weg van die dag af dat hy hier aangekom het, maar dit kan tog nie wees omdat hy daarop uit was om my te beroof nie. Dit is die deel wat ek nie kan glo nie.

“Wel, Mevrouw, dit is waar,” sê die sheriff. Hy kyk vol jammerte vir my. “Ek kan sien die man het jou toegeneentheid en vertroue gewen, en dit maak sy misdaad net meer laakbaar, in my oë.”

My woorde kom vol woede uit. “Ek weet nie watter misdaad jy dink hy gepleeg het nie, maar dit is nie teen my gemik nie. In al die tyd wat ek hom ken, het hy niks verkeerds gedoen nie, en hy het ook nie my geneentheid probeer steel nie.” Ek verstik byna aan die leuen. Gabe hét my en my kinders se toegeneentheid gesteel. Ek weet net nie of hy dit doelbewus gedoen het of nie.

“Luister,” gaan ek voort, “Gabe se optrede teenoor my was nog net eerbaar. Hy het harder gewerk as wat van enige gehuurde werker verwag kan word, en hy het niks meer van my gevat as sy etes en ’n bed in die skuur nie.”

“Kalmere nou net, Eliza. Gee my ’n kans om jou te vertel wat ek en John Wakefield uitgevind het.”

“Wat het meneer Wakefield hiermee te doen?”

“Ek kom daarby. Jy sien, nadat ek ’n paar maande gelede met meneer Harper gesels het, het ek navraag begin doen in Chicago om iets omtrent die vent se agtergrond te probeer uitvind.”

“Hoekom? Watter reg het jy gehad? Watter rede?”

“Laat ek klaar praat.” Hy hou sy hande uit om my stil te maak. “Die mense by die *Chicago Tribune* het vir my gesê ‘Gabriel Harper’ is net sy skrywersnaam. Toe ek egter navraag doen oor sy ware identiteit, het ek uitgevind hy beweer sy regte naam is Matthew Wyatt, dieselfde as jou swaer.”

*Gabe is regtig Matthew.* ’n Vloedgolf emosies spoel oor my: verligting, vrees, vreugde, ongeloof. Ek kan nie eens begin dink wat dit vir my en die kinders en ons toekoms beteken nie. Al wat ek weet, is dat ek die man gekry het waarna ek nog die hele tyd soek en dat ek verlief is op hom, en ek is seker hy is lief vir my ook. Tog tree die sheriff steeds op asof hy vir Gabe in die

tronk wil gooi. Hy dra die nuus aan my oor asof dit 'n groot tragedie is.

“John Wakefield het onlangs vir my vertel dat hy jou swaer probeer opspoor,” gaan die sheriff voort. “Ek verstaan dat Matthew volgens Frank se testament 'n groot erfporsie kry, of hoe? In elk geval, meneer Wakefield se soektog en my navrae het ons na hierdie selfde man toe gelei; hierdie sogenaamde Gabriel Harper.”

Ek kry uiteindelik my stem terug. “Is dit 'n misdaad om 'n skrywersnaam te gebruik? As Gabe regtig my swaer is, is dit wonderlike nuus. Dit is ook nie teen die wet vir hom om hier te bly en vir my te werk nie, of hoe?”

“Eliza, die man wat nog die hele tyd hier vir jou werk, is nié die Matthew Wyatt wat in Deer Springs grootgeword het nie.”

“Hoe weet jy hy is nie? Mense verander. Hy moes in die oorlog veg –”

“Daar is 'n baie eenvoudige manier om uit te vind. Is die voorpunt van sy regterhand se wysvinger af? Nael en al? Die regte Matthew het toe hy twaalf of dertien was 'n ongeluk met 'n hooisnyer se lem gehad. Vingers groei nie terug nie. Ek en John glo die man het hierheen gekom om jou en jou kinders van hulle regmatige erfporsie te beroof. Jy was alleen, kwesbaar, en het sy hulp nodig gehad.”

“Gabe het dan nooit van Frank se testament geweet nie. Ek het nooit vir hom 'n woord daarvan gesê nie.”

“Moet hom nie verdedig nie, mevrou Wyatt. Ons glo hy het geweet. Hierdie indringer, Gabriel Harper of wie hy ook al is, weet alles omtrent die ware Matthew Wyatt. John Wakefield het 'n lasbrief uitgereik vir sy werkreords by die koerant om te sien of hy geregtig is op die erflating en gevind dat Harper sy ouers as Frank en Lydia Wyatt opgegee het, en sy geboorteplek as Deer Springs. Hy het selfs Matthew se geboortedatum gebruik.”

Gabe weet baie meer as dit. Hy weet allerhande persoonlike goed, soos watter tipe pa Frank Wyatt was asook die geheim van hoe Willie verdrink het. Hy weet ook dat Matthew nie Frank se regte seun is nie. Ek bewee soos 'n tent in 'n orkaan. Die sheriff moes dit raakgesien het, want hy sit sy hand op my skouer om my te ondersteun.

“Soos ek gesê het, die regte Matthew Harper se een wysvinger kort 'n lit. As jy net vir my wil sê waar Gabriel Harper is, sal jy self sien wat die waarheid is.”

Ek weet reeds wat die waarheid is. Gabe se vingers is heel. Dit is hoe tannie Batty moes geweet het hy is nie Matthew nie. Ek draai na haar toe, maar sy het verdwyn. Sy het 'n oomblik gelede nog langs my gestaan toe die sheriff hier aangekom het, en nou is sy weg – so stil soos 'n kat verdwyn. Ek



kan nie alles inneem nie. Ek is so stomgeslaan om te dink dat Gabe 'n krimineel is wat hiernatoe gekom het om my te bedrieg dat ek nie kan praat nie. Ek kan dit steeds nie glo nie. Die sheriff sit albei sy hande op my skouers, asof hy weet ek het ondersteuning nodig.

“Ons weet die regte Matthew Wyatt het in Chicago gaan woon nadat die weermag hom ontslaan het,” sê hy. “Die polisie in Chicago is baie besorgd, want dit lyk of Matthew spoorloos verdwyn het. Jou meneer Harper kan netsowel 'n aandeel in sy verdwyning hê. Moet hom nie beskerm nie, Eliza. Sê vir my waar hy is.”

Ek sukkel om die sheriff se wrede woorde te aanvaar. Ek wil hom nie glo nie. Het ek dan verlief geraak op 'n krimineel? Het ek toegelaat dat my kinders op 'n moordenaar se skoot sit?

“Gabe is in die appelskuur,” sê ek uiteindelik. “Hy is besig om die sorteermasjien vir die appels gereed te kry.”

Ek volg sheriff Foster oor die werf tot in die appelskuur en dit voel of ek droom. Toe ons binnegaan, is daar egter geen teken van Gabe nie. Net tannie Batty staan teen die sorteermasjien met 'n breë glimlag op haar gesig. Winky sit by haar voete en sy tong hang soos gewoonlik by sy bek uit.

“Waar is meneer Harper?” vra die sheriff vir haar.

“Hy is nie hier nie, Dan,” sê sy. “Ek is bevrees hy is weg.”

Die sheriff stap verby haar en hardloop by die agterste deur uit wat oop staan.

Ek kan my oë nie glo nie. “Tannie het hom gewaarsku, nè?”

“Ja. Gabe het my gevra om dit te doen. Onthou jy toe hy by my huis gewerk het en Dan Foster gedreig het om hom dop te hou? Gabe het my laat belowe dat as die sheriff ooit weer na hom kom soek, ek hom dadelik sal waarsku.”

“Maar hoekom? Wat steek Gabe weg?”

Sy trek haar skouers op. “Ek het hom nie gevra nie. Ek het hom net gewaarsku dat sheriff Foster hier is, soos ek belowe het ek sou, en Gabe is soos 'n blits hier weg.”

Dan kom die sheriff uitasem terug. “Ek hoop jy glo my nou, mevrou Wyatt. Onskuldige mans hardloop nie vir die gereg weg nie. Kan ek jou telefoon gebruik? Ek wil die honde laat kom.”

“Ek het nie 'n telefoon nie.”

Hy blaas sy asem gefrustreerd uit. “Wie is jou naaste bure? Het Alvin Greer een?”

“Jy hoef nie jou honde te laat kom nie,” sê tannie Batty. “My Winky is 'n uitstekende jaghond. Gee net vir hom iets van Gabe om aan te ruik en hy sal

so gou soos blits sy spoor vat.” Winky blaf asof hy saamstem.

Die sheriff kyk na die klein vet hondjie en frons skepties. “Juffrou Fowler ... Ek dink regtig nie – ”

“Probeer dit, Sheriff. Kyk, hier is Gabe se sakdoek.” Sy druk dit onder Winky se neus. Hy snuffel aan die materiaal asof sy lewe daarvan afhang. “Soek vir Gabe, honne. Soek vir Gabe,” sê sy.

Winky druk sy neus op die grond en vat die spoor. Hy stap op sy koddige bene by die appelskuur se agterdeur uit. Ek weet hy het regtig Gabe se spoor gekry, want hy draf reguit skuur toe en nie op sy normale dronkerige sigsagpatroon waarop sy blinde oog hom gewoonlik lei nie. Ek wil hom keer, maar ek weet nie hoe óf hoekom nie. As Gabe regtig die krimineel is wat sheriff Foster sê hy is, hoekom wil ek hom dan nog beskerm?

Winky lei ons na die werkswinkel waar Gabe slaap. Hy stoot die deur met sy snoet oop, spring dan op Gabe se bed en blaf.

“Hy is nie hier nie,” sê die sheriff omgekrap.

“Nee, maar ek kan jou ’n brief gee dat hy sopas hier was,” sê tannie Batty. “Dit is waar Gabe die hele tyd gebly het. Kyk net hier! Sy tikmasjien en al sy ander besittings is weg.”

Ek kan nie verstaan wat tannie Batty doen nie. Hoekom sal sy die een oomblik vir Gabe waarsku net om hom die volgende oomblik te verrai?

Die sheriff wys na die klere wat netjies opgevou op ’n stoel lê. “Is dit nie sy klere nie? Hy sou nie ver gegaan het sonder dit nie.”

“Dit is Sam s’n,” sê ek. “Ek het dit vir Gabe geleen, want hy het nie juis iets anders gehad om aan te trek nie. Hy het dit hier gelos, want hy is nie ’n dief nie.”

“Hy het dit egter onlangs aangehad, so dit sal nog Gabe se reuk daaraan hê,” sê tannie Batty ewe hulpvaardig. Sy hou een van die hemde naby Winky se snoet en die klein hondjie raak van voor af opgewonde. Hy blaf, spring van die bed af en volg dan Gabe se spoor by die skuur se agterste deur uit. Hy lei ons in die paadjie af wat die koeie altyd volg wanneer hulle gaan wei en klim dan onderdeur die doringdraad voordat hy die bosse in hardloop. Ek en tannie Batty klim gemaklik tussen die drade deur, maar dit vat sheriff Foster ’n bietjie langer om deur die drade te klim sonder om sy broek te skeur. Winky kom terug en wag geduldig aan die ander kant vir hom.

“Het ek nie vir jou gesê hy is ’n uitstekende jaghond nie, Sheriff?” sê tannie Batty trots.

Winky blaf weer en hardloop tussen die ruigtes in. Hy lei ons na ’n klomp digte onkruid en takke diep in die bos.

“Dit lyk na die een of ander nes,” sê die sheriff en sit sy hand op sy holster.

“Ek sal julle wed hy kruip daarbinne weg. Staan terug, julle.”

Winky blaf skielik drie keer, draai om en hardloop vinniger terug huis toe as wat ek hom nog ooit sien hardloop het. Tannie Batty gryp die sheriff se arm vas. “Wag ’n bietjie, Dan. Ek sal nie sommer net daar ingaan as ek jy is nie, want –”

“Ek het gesê staan terug, juffrou Fowler. Harper weet hy is in ’n hoek en hy kan dalk gevaarlik wees.”

“Ek dink egter jy moet weet Winky het ’n groot fout begaan en –”

“Ek wil hê albei van julle moet terugstaan en ophou om met hierdie arrestasie in te meng,” sê hy streng. Hy wys in die paadjie af na ’n groot denneboom. “Gaan staan daar, uit my pad uit.”

“Ons moet liever doen wat die man sê,” sê tannie Batty en trek haar skouers op.

“Maar is Gabe –?”

“Vertrou my, Toots.” Sy trek my in die paadjie af en ons gaan staan onder die denneboom en wag. Sheriff Foster haal sy geweer uit die holster.

“Kom dadelik uit, Harper,” skree hy. “Ek weet jy is daarbinne. Jy kan nie meer wegkom nie.” Toe niks gebeur nie, tel hy ’n tak op en druk dit tussen die rugte in. “Moet dinge nie moeiliker maak vir jouself nie.”

Hy steek weer met die tak, dieper, en ek hoor ’n ritseling in die rugte. Van die veilige afstand af waarheen tannie Batty my gelei het, sien ek ’n beweging. ’n Bos donker hare verskyn en dan skree sheriff Foster. Die oomblik toe hy skree, oorweldig die ongelooflike stank van ’n muishond ons al drie.

“Jig! Ek het hom probeer waarsku,” sê tannie Batty en skud haar kop.

Ek voel jammer vir sheriff Foster. Die stank is so erg dat dit ’n mens se asem wegslaan en jou oë laat traan – en die muishond het hom van naderby besproei voordat hy tussen die bosse verdwyn het. Die sheriff kan nie ophou hoes nie en dit lyk of hy gaan naar word. Ons moet hom teruglei huis toe, want sy oë brand so erg dat hy nie kan sien nie.

Toe ons by die agterstoep kom, gaan haal ek ’n skottel water sodat hy sy oë kan uitspoel, maar ek is glad nie van plan om hom in die huis in te nooi terwyl hy so stink nie.

“Ons kan die koperbad vir jou buitetoë bring,” bied tannie Batty aan. “Ek sal vir jou ’n bad met tamatiesap maak. Dit is gewaarborg om die stank weg te vat.”

“Nee ... nee ...” sê hy hoesend.

“Wel, laat ek ten minste vir jou ander klere gee om aan te trek,” sê ek. Hy kan egter nie gou genoeg in sy kar kom en wegry nie.

“Hy moes na my geluister het,” sê tannie Batty toe die sheriff haastig in die plaaspad af ry. Voordat die stof ’n kans kry om te gaan lê, bars sy uit van die lag asof sy dit al so lank onderdruk dat sy móét lag voordat sy ontplof. Ek staar na haar.

“Jy het hom met opset na daardie muishond toe gelei, nè?”

“Ek het niks gedoen nie,” sê sy so onskuldig soos ’n kind. “Winky het dit gedoen.”

“Maar – ”

Sy vat sag aan my arm. “Winky dink die wêreld van Gabe, jy weet.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**W**e saw no more of Sheriff Foster that day. I waited and watched all afternoon, hoping Gabe would come back and explain himself, but he'd disappeared. Didn't he trust us enough, after all this time, to tell us who he really was and why he was running? I guess not because he was gone for good. Once again, I felt all alone.

"Where did Mr. Harper go?" Becky asked as we sat around the dinner table that night. I think we were all painfully aware of Gabe's empty chair.

"He didn't tell anybody where he was going," I said. "Back to where he came from, I suppose."

"You mean to heaven? Was he really an angel?" Becky asked.

"No, he wasn't an angel—" I began, but Aunt Batty interrupted me.

"Well, he was in a way," she said. "Angels are messengers from God, sent to give us some help whenever we need it. That's what Gabe did. He helped all of us out, didn't he? He worked in the orchard for your mama, and he fixed my roof as good as new, and he taught you boys how to play baseball and swim and catch fish, and he made Becky's swing...."

"Then why did he leave us?" Jimmy asked.

"I guess his work here must have been all finished," Aunt Batty said. "Maybe God needed Gabe's help someplace else."

"But we still need him here!" Jimmy said. I heard the tears in his voice. This was exactly what I'd been so afraid of—that my kids would feel the awful pain of being abandoned when Gabe left. And I felt the pain every bit as much as they did.

“You’re looking to the wrong person for help,” Aunt Batty said. “God is the one who helped us. He sent His messenger into our lives because He wanted us to know that we can rely on Him. And God is still here helping us, even though Gabe is gone.”

My kids didn’t want to hear all this church talk, and neither did I. We were all hurting much too badly to take any comfort in God just then.

“Is Mr. Harper c-coming back?” Luke asked.

Aunt Batty seemed to realize that her fancy words about God weren’t getting through. She wrapped her arms around Luke, who sat at the table beside her, and gave him a hug.

“Listen, Toots,” she said. “Gabe loved all of us very much, and he loved living here. He wouldn’t have left us like he did unless he had a very good reason. And if there’s any way in the world he can come back to us someday, I believe he will.”

The more I thought about the mystery of Gabriel Harper, the more unsettled I felt. I had believed he was Matthew for so long that I still found it hard to root out the idea, even though I now knew for a fact that he wasn’t. But why would he impersonate Matthew? Had he planted all those stories about his father and his brother Willie in that burlap bag of his, hoping I’d find them? Did he want me to think he was my brother-in-law? And what about his injured leg? He had arrived at our door a very sick man—he might have died!—and that wasn’t something he could fake.

But the thought that unnerved me the most, the thought that made me want to lock all the doors when I went to bed that night, was the question the sheriff had raised—what had happened to the real Matthew Wyatt? Gabe must know the answer if he took on Matthew’s identity. Why would he run from the sheriff if he had nothing to hide? Could Gabe Harper really be capable of...murder?

After I’d tucked the kids into bed for the night, I went out to the

workshop in the barn where Gabe used to sleep. I told myself I needed to gather up those clothes of Sam's that he'd left behind, but in my heart I think I hoped to find Gabe hiding out there somewhere. I wanted him to offer me a simple explanation for this whole mess. I wanted to joke about what a silly misunderstanding it all was. I wanted to hear him laugh as I told him how Winky had saved the day and helped him escape from the sheriff. I wanted Gabe back—the old Gabe who'd worked beside me trimming trees and filling smudge pots and spraying apple trees and helping Angel the calf come into the world—not the dangerous Gabe who the sheriff insisted had lied in order to steal my orchard and my heart.

As I sat on the edge of Gabe's cot, listening to the gentle rustlings of the cows and horses in their stalls, I knew one thing for certain—Gabe had indeed stolen my heart. He was gone and he'd taken my heart with him. He'd left behind a big, empty, hurting place where it once had been.

I stood to go, scooping up the clothes I had come for. I knew I would have to hide them away in a drawer again, so they wouldn't remind me of Gabe. As I turned to leave I noticed that the door to the pot-bellied stove stood open a crack. I gave it a quick push with my foot to close it, but it wouldn't shut. The stove should have been empty in the summertime, but it wasn't. Something was jammed in the way.

I laid the clothes on the bed and bent to see what it was. Inside lay one of Gabe's notebooks—the one he had just asked me to buy for him the last time I went to town, in fact. One of the corners was charred, and it looked as though Gabe had shoved it into the stove in a hurry, then lit a match to it. The fire must have gone out when the door didn't close. I brushed away the burnt wooden match and singed paper, then pulled the rest of the notebook out of the stove. Gabe had shoved it in upside down and only a few blank pages at the end of the

book had burned. I could still read the ones filled with writing.

I carried Gabe's notebook back to the house, and after locking all the farmhouse doors for the first time in my life, I took the notebook upstairs to read in bed.

I started writing when I was ten because the words had begun to pile up inside me and I had no other way to release them. All my hoarded thoughts and feelings exploded onto the pages of my journals where I could finally liberate them, sort through them, make sense of them. Writing became my secret release valve when the pressure to express myself built up. And without ever mentioning my father or describing him, every word I wrote had to do with him, about coming to terms with who he was. And who I was.

My father was a sturdy, square-shouldered attorney who carried himself with the dignity of a prince and the belligerence of a prize fighter. People naturally stepped aside when they saw him coming. They had to—my father would step aside for no man. But he was no boor. Raised in wealth and privilege, he possessed impeccable manners, dressing for even the most casual occasions in a starched white shirt, dark suit, waistcoat, and tie. He began going bald while in his thirties, but his demeanor was such that people saw a broad, wise forehead, not a lack of hair. Beneath his plain, almost somber appearance lay a magnetic, charismatic personality that drew people to him. He was a man to be respected, feared, and hated.

I descended from a long line of such men. My grandfather had been a prominent state supreme court justice, also respected, feared, and hated. My father groomed me to carry on the family legacy, just as my grandfather had groomed him to assume the state leadership of his political party. They expected me to study law, to pattern myself in their mold, to become a partner in their prestigious law firm. One day I would take over the reins of power, making or breaking potential candidates, keeping the political machine well-oiled.

By the time I was ten, my mother was no longer allowed to be involved in my life. Raising a son was a father's job. My mother's life consisted of making my father look



good, orchestrating the endless stream of social events his position required, and raising my three sisters to be proper ladies. She also took part in various social causes—carefully chosen by my father, of course. Woman’s suffrage was not among them.

My father reminded me of his expectations with every glance, every gesture, every breath he took. He was a loud, angry man whose voice carried through the walls and doors of our house. He had little patience for fools—and I seemed to be chief among them. He never physically abused me, never resorted to slaps or thrashings no matter how badly I deserved them. Instead, he used words as his most potent weapons—the tools of his trade as a lawyer and political mastermind—and he wielded them with deadly accuracy to attack, destroy, and avenge. Whether in the echoing courtroom or in the smoky political meetings he held in his study, my father marshaled words like a general commanding troops, deploying them to annihilate his enemies. I couldn’t defend myself against his arsenal.

It wasn’t that I had nothing to say—words filled my head. But my tongue continually misfired like a bomb with a faulty detonator, leaving me defenseless against the intensity and range of his firepower. The problem began when I was in fifth grade.

“Why is your arithmetic score lower than all the others?” my father bellowed as he surveyed my report card.

“I...Id...don’t—”

“Stop it! You sound like a blithering idiot!” Father stared at me with his courtroom glare and I didn’t dare look away, didn’t dare cry. He shoved the report card under my nose. “I asked you a question!”

The words were right there in my mind. I knew what I wanted to tell him. But the knots that twisted through my stomach like a nest of snakes had spread to my tongue, immobilizing it. “M...my t...Teacher—”

“Spit it out! What’s the matter with you? Do you want people to think you’re a moron?”

The more he raged, the worse I stuttered, and the more I stuttered, the worse he raged. I grew so nervous that my speech problem soon spilled over from home to school and the other boys mimicked and mocked me. I reacted with my fists. The punishment I received at school couldn't compare with the punishment of facing my father that night. Winning his approval was the sole purpose of my life—to lose it meant to lose all meaning. I lived an arctic existence in the best of times, basking in the feeble warmth and dim rays of his benediction. To lose even that scant winter sunlight meant suffering a frigid darkness that was unbearable. I faced him in his study, shivering.

“I would expect the son of an ignorant immigrant to resort to using his fists,” he began. “Certainly not my son. I have properly educated my son to use his brains to dispose of his enemies, real or imagined. But perhaps a mistake has been made. Perhaps it wasn't my son after all, who involved himself in this...brouhaha?” He hadn't looked at me from the time I first entered the room, but his eyes finally met mine as he spoke the last word. He froze me with his gaze.

“No, s...sir.”

“Speak up!” he bellowed.

“It w... was m...me, sir.”

“Stop that! You know how I hate your moronic stammering!” I nodded. He seemed satisfied with that. “Now, would you care to enlighten me as to the cause of your degrading behavior?” He held the headmaster's letter, which fully explained the incident, in his manicured hand.

Words stampeded through my brain like an ill-disciplined army, knocking each other down as they jostled for position, piling up in confusion and disarray. Very few of them ever made it past my lips. “Th...They were m...mocking me.”

“What? M...mocking you? Why would anyone m...mock you?”

My mouth opened. My lips moved. I willed my voice to speak, to explain, but

nothing came out. I felt sick with self hatred.

“Get out of my sight if you’re going to act like an imbecile!” he growled.

I fled to the bathroom and vomited.

Later, the words behaved themselves as they paraded onto paper, marching in orderly sentences and phrases. I composed letters of apology to the boys I had attacked, to my teachers and headmaster, to my father. I cited examples from literature and history to demonstrate that I understood my folly. I humbly begged their forgiveness. Then I worked harder than I ever had in my life to make the long journey back to my father’s good graces, secretly warming myself beside the small bonfires of contentment I found in writing.

I learned to talk no more than necessary in school. Some of my teachers sympathized, allowing me to stay within my safe shelter of silence—most didn’t. Most of my teachers knew my father and my grandfather as prominent, powerful men who had also attended their private, exclusive boys’ school and contributed generously to their alumni fund. To compensate for my paralyzed tongue I learned to write, and once I’d expressed myself on paper, I could read what I’d written without stuttering. Armed with a dictionary and a thesaurus, my arsenal was nearly as well-stocked as my father’s, even if my delivery lacked his firepower.

The summer after I finished fifth grade was one of the hottest ones on record. My father sent me to my aunt and uncle’s farm downstate to escape the feverish heat that blanketed the city. Aunt June, my mother’s youngest sister, had “foolishly married beneath her” and lived on a farm with her husband and five children. But if Aunt June had made a mistake, I certainly saw no sign of it. The three summers I spent with their loving, contented family were the happiest days of my life. My stuttering stopped completely. I spent a good part of the time devouring Herman Walters’ adventure books, and for a little while I could forget my own blundering incompetence and self-loathing as I fearlessly triumphed with Walters’ heroes. His books took me to places far beyond my father’s reach. Then, in a rare burst of self-confidence, I sat down on my

aunt and uncle's shady front porch as the cicadas buzzed, and I wrote an adventure novel of my own.

The evening I returned to the city, my father summoned me to his study to give an accounting of my summer. I brought the notebook filled with words, hoping it would do the explaining for me.

"What did you do with yourself all summer?" he asked, not unkindly. I showed him my notebook. "What's all this?"

"I w...wrote a story. It's about p...pirates and—" But he was already reading it, scanning the first page, flipping to the next and the next. My father could read very rapidly. He digested *The New York Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The New York Times* every morning before I finished my bacon and eggs.

"This is nothing but banal, sentimental *trash*," he said, slapping my notebook closed a few moments later. "I might have known that fool you call your uncle would encourage something like this."

He rose majestically from his club chair and carried my adventure story into the kitchen. Cora, our cook, bustled around the room working up a sweat as she prepared our dinner on the huge cast-iron stove. My father grabbed one of the stove's chrome lifters in his beefy hand and opened a lid.

"This is what we do with rubbish."

I saw the flames licking inside and cried out, "No!"

But he casually tossed my notebook into the fire and slammed the lid shut again. I ran from the kitchen, knowing my father would scorn my tears. The sound of that cast-iron lid closing so irrevocably has echoed in my heart ever since. In the years that followed, I would often lay in bed in the morning and listen to Cora slamming those lids as she stoked the fires to cook our breakfast, and the tears would come. My writing was rubbish—banal, sentimental trash. I never wrote fiction again.

My father wasn't entirely tyrannical. At times he was a glorious, glittering, gregarious man who drew people to himself by cords of their own obligation and neediness. Important people such as the mayor, the governor, and various state senators and congressmen attended the lavish parties my father hosted, and their longing for his approval seemed as great as my own. We all craved his respect and admiration more than light and air, knowing that only then would our lives have meaning.

It was possible to win my father's favor, and I strove with all my heart to do just that. But he doled out his words of approval like a miser handing out pennies to urchins. A grunt conveyed acceptance; a faint, grudging nod gave his endorsement; a near-smile appeared when his furrowed brow would smooth for a moment and his grim mouth would form into a straight, hard line instead of its usual down-turned snarl. I learned to recognize these as expressions of praise, and I sought to earn them as diligently as a monk seeks purity.

Since my father's one passion outside of politics and the courtroom was baseball, I took up the sport in high school.

*"Will you come to my game, sir?"* I practiced pronouncing the words again and again, longing to ask him, but in the end I knew I'd never get past *"w...will"* or *"y...you"* without stuttering. Instead, I left copies of our game schedules where he was sure to find them. The entire season passed, his law practice and his political maneuverings keeping him too busy to come.

Then one miraculous day he finally did come. It was our team's last regular game of the season and we were tied with our school rival for the championship. That rivalry, which dated back to my father's years at the school, drew him from his office.

I nearly collapsed in a state of nerves when I saw him in the bleachers, but I quickly recovered when I recognized my long-awaited opportunity to make him proud of me. I played harder and better that afternoon than I'd ever played in my life, diving to the grass as I stretched to catch a ground ball; making a mad, sliding dash to steal third base; hitting a crucial single to bring in the run that tied the score. But I wasn't the star.

Our pitcher, Paul Abbott, was clearly the star.

“That pitcher of yours is quite a player!” my father said at the dinner table that night. It was the first comment he’d made about the game. I waited for more, unconsciously holding my breath while he cut a piece of beef, then chewed it thoughtfully. “I’d say you have a long way to go to be as good as he is.”

Devastating words. I’d wanted to hear just one word of praise—“Good job, son” or “I’m proud of you,” but my best efforts at baseball had fallen well short of the mark. I never tried out for the team again. I valued my father’s opinion above all others, and if he pronounced me a failure, then I saw myself as one.

During my sophomore year, one of my English teachers persuaded me to write for the school newspaper. “You write so beautifully—so flawlessly!” he insisted, and I lapped up his praise like a desert wanderer gulps water. I wrote for the school newspaper—careful, clean reporting that risked nothing of myself. I served as editor during my junior and senior years—the youngest student in the history of the school to earn that honor. My father never knew. I was terrified to tell him, terrified that he would pronounce my efforts rubbish and rob me of the worthiness I felt every time I saw my work, my name, in print.

My father’s hold over me grew steadily stronger as I grew older. By the time I graduated from prep school, my life revolved around his like a planet in orbit around the sun, held captive to his will by the relentless pull of his personality. I would say anything, do anything he wished. I would attend the college he’d attended, I would study to prepare for law school, I would one day pursue a career in politics. My father blithely ignored the fact that someone who stuttered as badly as I did couldn’t possibly succeed in either law or politics. He believed that by the sheer force of his will he could transform my tongue—his will had prevailed in everything else.

Writing courses were my favorites in college, and once again I secretly wrote for the school newspaper. My father never saw the journalism awards I won. Away from his influence, caught up in the excitement and challenge of campus life, I experienced my

first faint stirrings of confidence in myself. I could write well. It gave me enormous pleasure to write. I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing it. I hated all the courses that would prepare me for law school. The prospect of taking speech class struck terror in me. And so I returned home at the end of each school year to a dreaded summer job in my father's law office, determined to explain to him just how much I hated the idea of practicing law, determined to tell him the truth—I wanted to change my major to journalism.

The words never came. Back in my familiar orbit I became miserable at the thought of disappointing him. I needed his approval so badly I would do anything, say anything in order to get it. I silently returned to college each fall and continued preparing for law school.

I graduated with honors. At the commencement ceremony, I accepted my father's nod of approval like a starving man accepts moldy bread—hungering for more but grateful for whatever crumbs I could get. I'd been accepted into the same law school that he and my grandfather had attended. I would start in the fall.

I worked in their law office again that summer, and with my father involved in an important upcoming election campaign, I often worked extra hours stuffing envelopes at party headquarters. My father had never invited me to observe the secret political maneuverings that took place behind closed doors, but shortly before I started law school, he ushered me into his smoke-filled conference room one night. The sight of so many important men seated around the table awed me, but the amazing words that flowed out of my father's mouth that night struck me speechless.

"My son has a talent for writing," he told the other men. "He was the youngest student to ever serve as editor of his prep school newspaper, and his articles have won journalism awards in college. I think he's the man to help us."

I had to lean against the table to keep from falling over. He knew! My father had known all along about my writing, and he wasn't angry. But when he said the words I'd waited all my life to hear, it took my breath away.

“Yes, I’m very proud of my son.”

He was proud of me! It was the first time in my life my father had ever praised me, and he praised me to his peers. I flew so close to the sun, basking in the warmth of his adulation, that the brightness blinded me to the truth of what came next.

“We need your help with something, son....”

For the next several hours, my father and his cronies fed me slanderous information about one of their political opponents and I wrote everything down, sharpening and honing my prose until it became a lethal weapon. I willingly became their hit man, hired to assassinate their enemy’s character.

Two days later my article appeared in leaflets that mysteriously appeared all over the city. Of course, my father and his party members could truthfully swear that they hadn’t written those damning words—I had. As lawyers, they’d been careful not to be libelous, but my work was a masterpiece of innuendo and gossip that cast enough doubt in people’s minds to ruin the opponent’s reputation. He would lose his good name as well as the election.

What I had done horrified me. I had used words the way my father and grandfather did—corrupting them to hurt and deceive and destroy people. I’d prostituted the rules of good journalism, altering and shading the truth for power. I hated myself. But worse still, I hated my father. I’d allowed him to seduce me—violate me.

When I left home the following day, my father thought I’d gone to law school ten days early to settle in. Instead, I ran off to enlist in the army. I didn’t write to him until after I’d completed my basic training, until it was much too late for even my powerful father or grandfather to change anything. I wanted nothing to do with officer’s training, in spite of my college education. I joined the infantry with farm boys and immigrants’ sons, hoping to lose myself in the great rank and file of enlisted men.

Seven months into my enlistment, on April 6, 1917, America entered the Great War. The army sent my friends and me to France to serve in the American Expeditionary



Forces under General Pershing. They paraded us through Paris on the Fourth of July, then dispatched us to training camps to learn the realities of sandbag dugouts and mud-filled trenches—conditions we would soon experience on the Western front.

They issued me a 0.3-caliber Springfield rifle to fight the enemy, but I had no weapons against the despair and destruction of warfare—no defense against the realities of headless corpses strewn like mangled dolls, of cities and forests reduced to rubble and charred stumps, of children starving. I endured the horror of watching individual lives—men I knew and loved—become nothing more than impersonal “forces” sacrificed for military objectives. I knew I could have wrestled these images into manageable proportions by writing about them, but I had committed murder with my words and now I had to suffer the full punishment for my crime. I would purge my sins at the Battle of Cantigny on May 28, 1918, at Belleau Wood from June 4 to June 26, and at St. Mihiel on September 12. That was where

That was where Gabe’s tale ended. It made upsetting bedtime reading. Added to everything else that had happened that day, I didn’t sleep one wink.

Early the next morning I tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. The fall air was chilly, perfect weather for putting a blush on my apples, but it made me shiver at the thought of the coming winter. I threw a few sticks of wood into the stove to make a fire, and as I lowered the cast-iron lid into place again I thought of Gabe’s story.

He must have heard me banging those lids shut every morning as he lay sick in my spare room. And if the story I’d read last night was true, the sound must have brought back painful memories. I recalled how Gabe had wept for his father the night his fever raged and had begged him for forgiveness. Tears came to my own eyes as I sat at the kitchen table, remembering how I’d left my own daddy in anger, too.

The spare-room door opened just then, and Aunt Batty came out. She wore her canary yellow sweater over her nightgown, and her hair

stuck up every which way. I must have looked just as tousled and bleary-eyed as she did because she came and stood beside my chair to hug me, resting her cheek on my hair.

“I didn’t sleep very well either, Toots,” she said. “I spent the whole night praying for that poor boy, praying that whatever it is that he’s wrestling with, God will help him do the right thing.”

I realized that Aunt Batty still didn’t know everything I knew about Gabe. I hadn’t told her what Sheriff Foster had said. I couldn’t bring myself to say the words out loud yesterday. But Gabe had stolen Aunt Batty’s heart, too. She had a right to know the truth about him. “You’d better sit down, Aunt Batty. I need to tell you something.”

She silently poured herself a cup of coffee, then sat down at the table across from me, stirring the sugar around and around with a teaspoon. I drew a deep breath, just like Gabe used to do when getting ready for me to doctor his leg. Saying the words out loud would probably rip my wounds wide open again, too.

“The sheriff told me that Gabe used Matthew’s name and his identity when he lived in Chicago. It seems Gabe knew all about Matthew—his birthday and his parents’ names and everything else. I thought for sure he really was Matthew.”

“No, didn’t I tell you he wasn’t? Matthew lost the tip of his finger when he was a boy and it always looked so ugly. Gabe had very nice hands, didn’t he?”

I stared down at the tabletop, trying in vain to erase the image of Gabe’s hands from my mind.

“The police are suspicious, Aunt Batty. They want to know what happened to the real Matthew. He disappeared and they think Gabe had something to do with it. I snooped in Gabe’s bag and read some of his stories while he was still sick, and the sheriff was right—he knew all about Matthew Wyatt. He wrote about how Willie fell through the ice and died. And he described Frank Wyatt to a T. He knew that

Frank wasn't Matthew's real father, too."

Aunt Batty pondered that for a moment before saying, "Maybe he met Matthew somewhere. Maybe Matthew told Gabe all those things."

"But why would Gabe steal Matthew's name and his identity? Sheriff Foster and Mr. Wakefield think he came here to steal the orchard from me."

She shook her head. "I don't believe that. Gabe never pretended to be Matthew when he lived with us. He told us he was Gabriel Harper, a writer...and he really was a writer. He let me read some of his pieces. What on earth would a journalist from Chicago do with an orchard?"

"I found another one of his stories last night," I told her. "He tried to burn it up in the workshop stove but it didn't catch fire. He must have written it within the last two weeks because I just bought that notebook for him. This story said that his father was a big-city lawyer who wanted to make him into a lawyer, too. But Gabe wanted to be a writer so he ran away and enlisted. I don't know if he's telling the truth this time or not."

Aunt Batty sighed. "I once wrote about being captured by headhunters in the jungles of Africa and I've never stepped one foot in Africa—much less met anyone who was interested in hunting my head."

"I just wish I knew the truth, that's all. Couldn't Gabe at least have told us the truth?"

Aunt Batty studied me for a long moment, her hands encircling her coffee cup. "You're in love with Gabe, aren't you, Toots?"

"No...yes...I don't know!"

"He loves you, too."

"How do you know that?"

"The same way I know you love him—it's written all over both of your faces. I saw you both trying to fight it. But you can't fight a force

as strong as love. Walter and I tried and we failed miserably. I know Gabe must have had an awfully good reason to force him to leave you like this.”

“It sure would help if I knew what that reason was. I didn’t want to love him, Aunt Batty, because I was so afraid this would happen. God keeps teasing me, giving me what I long for and then snatching it all away again. My mama was right. She said love was just like cotton candy. It promises so many things, but when you try and take your fill, there’s nothing there at all. Only a sweet, lingering taste—if you’re one of the lucky ones. But I guess I’m not one of the lucky ones because right now love tastes pretty bitter to me. I’ve been thinking about it all night, and I’ve come to the conclusion that God must be punishing me for lying.”

Aunt Batty looked at me as if she didn’t believe I was capable of lying. “What did you lie about, Toots?”

Her faith in me stung my conscience like a hive full of angry bees. I knew it was high time I started telling the truth.

“Everything! I’ve been lying ever since I got off the train in Deer Springs ten years ago. Sheriff Foster says Gabe lied to me in order to steal the orchard from me, and if that’s true, then it serves me right because I did the very same thing. I made Sam think I loved him so I could have a home here. I never told him the truth about myself, either. I’m an impostor, just like Gabe. And now God is paying me back for everything I’ve done....”

## ~ Hoofstuk vyftien ~

Ons sien daardie dag nie weer vir sheriff Foster nie. Ek wag en kyk die hele middag met die hoop dat Gabe sal terugkom om 'n verduideliking te gee, maar hy het verdwyn. Vertrou hy ons dan ná al die tyd nie genoeg om vir ons te vertel wie hy regtig is en hoekom hy vlug nie? Seker nie, want dit lyk of hy vir goed weg is. Ek voel al weer heeltemal alleen.

“Waar is meneer Harper dan?” vra Becky toe ons die aand om die etenstafel sit. Ek dink ons almal is pynlik bewus van Gabe se leë stoel.

“Hy het vir niemand gesê waarheen hy gaan nie,” sê ek. “Seker maar terug waar hy vandaan kom.”

“Bedoel Mamma hemel toe? Was hy regtig 'n engel?” vra Becky.

“Nee, hy was nie 'n engel nie – ” begin ek sê, maar tannie Batty val my in die rede.

“Wel, hy was op 'n manier een,” sê sy. “Engele is boodskappers van God, gestuur om ons te help wanneer ons dit nodig het. Dit is wat Gabe gedoen het. Hy het almal van ons gehelp, of hoe? Hy het vir julle mamma in die boord gewerk, en hy het my dak mooi reggemaak, en hy het julle seuns geleer om bofbal te speel en te swem en vis te vang, en hy het vir Becky 'n swaai gemaak ... ”

“Hoekom het hy dan weggegaan van ons af?” vra Jimmy.

“Sy werk hier is seker maar klaar,” sê tannie Batty. “God het dalk nou Gabe se hulp iewers anders nodig.”

“Maar ons het hom nog hier nodig,” sê Jimmy. Ek hoor die trane in sy stem. Dit is presies waarvoor ek bang was; dat my kinders die aaklige pyn van verlatenheid sal ervaar wanneer Gabe sou weggaan. En ek ervaar dieselfde pyn net soveel soos hulle.

“Julle kyk na die verkeerde persoon vir hulp,” sê tannie Batty. “Dit is God wat ons gehelp het. Hy het sy boodskapper na ons lewe gestuur, want Hy wou hê ons moet weet dat ons op Hom kan staatmaak. God is nog steeds hier besig om ons te help, selfs al is Gabe weg.”

My kinders wil nie al hierdie kerkpraatjies hoor nie, en ek ook nie. Ons almal kry in hierdie stadium heeltemal te seer om enige troos uit God te put.

“Gaan meneer Harper t-terugkom?” vra Luke.

Dit lyk of tannie Batty besef dat haar mooi woorde oor God nie in hierdie stadium tot enigiemand deurdring nie. Sy sit haar arms om Luke wat langs

haar aan tafel sit en gee hom 'n stywe druk.

“Luister, Toots,” sê sy. “Gabe is baie lief vir almal van ons en hy het daarvan gehou om hier te bly. Hy sou nie sommerso hier weggegaan het as hy nie 'n baie goeie rede daarvoor het nie. En as daar enige manier in die wêreld is waarop hy eendag kan terugkom na ons toe, glo ek hy sal.”

Hoe meer ek aan die geheimenis van Gabriel Harper dink, hoe ongemakliker voel ek. Ek het vir so lank geglo hy is Matthew dat ek dit nog moeilik vind om die idee te laat vaar, selfs al weet ek nou vir 'n feit dit is nie wie hy is nie. Hoekom sal hy dan maak of hy Matthew is? Het hy al daardie stories oor sy pa en broer Willie in die goingsak geplant met die hoop dat ek dit sou kry? Wou hy hê ek moes dink hy is my swaer? En wat van sy beseerde been? Hy het as 'n baie siek man by ons deur opgedaag – hy kon doodgegaan het! – en dit is tog nie iets wat hy kon voorgee nie.

Die gedagte wat my egter die meeste ontstel, die gedagte wal wil maak dat ek daardie aand voor ek bed toe gaan al die deure wil sluit, is die vraag wat die sheriff geopper het: Wat het van die regte Matthew Wyatt geword? Gabe moet die antwoord ken indien hy Matthew se identiteit aangeneem het. Waarom sal hy van die sheriff af wegvlug as hy niks het om weg te steek nie? Kan Gabe Harper regtig in staat wees ... tot moord?

Nadat ek die kinders in die bed gesit het, gaan ek uit na die werkswinkel in die skuur waar Gabe geslaap het. Ek sê vir myself ek moet Sam se klere gaan haal wat hy daar gelos het, maar ek dink dat ek tog in my hart hoop om vir Gabe te kry waar hy daar iewers wegkruip. Ek wil hê hy moet vir my 'n eenvoudige verduideliking gee vir die hele gemors. Ek wil grappe maak oor wat 'n lawwe misverstand dit is. Ek wil hom hoor lag terwyl ek vir hom vertel hoe Winky die situasie gered en hom gehelp het om van die sheriff af weg te kom. Ek wil vir Gabe terughê – die ou Gabe wat saam met my die bome gesnoei en die oliepotte gevul en die appelbome gespuut en die kalf Engel in die wêreld help kom het – nie die gevaarlike Gabe wat volgens die sheriff gejok het sodat hy my boord en my hart kon steel nie.

Terwyl ek op die rand van Gabe se bed sit en na die sagte geritsel van die koeie en perde in hulle stalle luister, weet ek een ding verseker: Gabe het inderdaad my hart gesteel. Hy is weg en hy het my hart saam met hom gevat. Hy het 'n groot, leë, seer plek agtergelaat waar my hart eens was.

Ek staan op om te gaan en tel die klere op wat ek eintlik kom haal het. Ek weet ek sal dit weer iewers in 'n laai moet wegsteek sodat dit my nie aan Gabe sal herinner nie. Toe ek omdraai om te gaan sien ek die klein stofie se deur staan op 'n skrefie oop. Ek stamp met my voet daarteen om dit toe te maak, maar dit steek vas. Die stofie moes in die somer skoongemaak gewees

het, maar dit is skynbaar nie gedoen nie. Iets keer dat die deur kan toegaan.

Ek sit die klere op die bed neer en buk om te kyk wat in die stof is. Binne-in lê een van Gabe se notaboek – om die waarheid te sê, dit is die een wat hy my gevra het om te koop die laaste keer toe ek in was dorp toe. Een van die hoeke is gebrand en dit lyk of Gabe dit inderhaas saam met 'n brandende vuurhoutjie in die stof gegooi het. Die vlam het seker doodgemaak toe die deur op 'n skrefie bly oopstaan het. Ek vee die gebrande vuurhoutjie en stukkies papier af en haal dan die res van die notaboek uit die stoof. Gabe het dit onderstebo ingedruk en net 'n paar van die leë bladsye agterin die boek het gebrand. Ek kan steeds dié lees waarop hy geskryf het.

Ek vat Gabe se notaboek saam terug in die huis in en nadat ek vir die eerste keer in my lewe die plaashuis se deure gesluit het, vat ek die boek saam met my boontoe sodat ek dit in die bed kan lees.

Ek het begin skryf toe ek tien was, want die woorde het binne-in my begin ophoop en daar was geen ander manier om daarvan ontslae te raak nie. Al my opgehoopde gedagtes en gevoelens het op die bladsye van my joernale ontplof waar ek dit uiteindelik kon vrylaat, daardeur sorteer, kon sin maak daarvan. Om te skryf het my geheime uitlaatklep geword wanneer die gevoel om myself uit te druk tot 'n punt opgebou het. En sonder dat ek ooit my pa noem of hom beskryf, het elke woord wat ek skryf met hom te doen; om berusting te kry oor wie hy was. En oor wie ek is.

My pa was 'n sterk, breed geskouerde prokureur met die waardigheid van 'n prins en die veglus van 'n kampioenvegter. Mense sou sommer vanself opsy staan wanneer hy aangestap kom. Hulle moes maar, want my pa sou vir geen mens opsy staan nie. Tog was hy nie onbeskof nie. Aangesien hy met rykdom en baie voorregte grootgeword het, het hy onberispelike maniere gehad en hy sou vir selfs die gemaklikste sosiale geleenthede steeds 'n gestyfde wit hemp, donker pak klere, onderbaadjie en das aantrek. Hy het reeds in sy dertigs begin bles word, maar sy houding was van so 'n aard dat mense 'n breë, verstandige voorkop gesien het en nie 'n gebrek aan hare nie. Onder sy eenvoudige, byna somber voorkoms was 'n byna magnetiese, charismatiese persoonlikheid wat mense na hom toe aangetrek het. Hy was 'n man wat gerespekteer, gevrees en gehaat is.

Ek stam uit 'n lang geslag van sulke mans af. My oupa was 'n vooraanstaande regter in die hooggeregshof; ook gerespekteer, gevrees, gehaat. My pa het my voorberei daarop om die familie-erfenis voort te sit, net soos my oupa hom gelei het om die leierskap van sy politieke party in die staat te aanvaar. Hulle het van my verwag om regte te studeer, om myself in hulle vorm te giet, om 'n vennoot in hulle invloedryke regsfirmas te word. Ek sou eendag die leiers oorneem, potensieële kandidate maak of breek, die politieke masjien goed geolê hou.

Teen die tyd dat ek tien was, is my ma nie meer toegelaat om betrokke te wees in my lewe nie. Dit was 'n pa se werk om 'n seun groot te maak. My ma se lewe het daaruit bestaan om my pa goed te laat lyk, die eidelose hoeveelheid sosiale geleenthede te organiseer wat my pa se posisie vereis het, en om my drie susters groot te maak sodat hulle ware dames sou wees. Sy was ook betrokke by verskeie liefdadigheidsorganisasies en sosiale komitees – alles natuurlik sorgvuldig deur my pa gekies. Stemreg vir vroue was nie een daarvan nie.

My pa sou my met elke kyk, elke gebaar, elke asemteug aan sy verwagtinge herinner. Hy was 'n luidrugtige, woedende man wie se stem deur die mure en deure van ons huis gedring het. Hy het min geduld met dwase gehad, en dit het gelyk of ek die grootste een van hulle almal is. Hy het

my nooit fisiek mishandel nie; hom nooit tot 'n klap of pak slae gewend nie, maak nie saak hoeveel ek dit verdien het nie. In plaas daarvan het hy woorde as sy gevaarlikste wapens gebruik – dít waarmee hy as prokureur en politieke leier gewerk het – en hy kon dit met dodelike akkuraatheid aanwend ten einde aan te val, te vernietig en wraak te neem. Of dit nou in die weergalmende hofsaal of in die rokerige politieke byeenkomste was wat hy in sy studeerkamer gehou het, kon my pa woorde aanvoer soos 'n generaal wat sy troepe lei en dit ontplooi ten einde sy vyande te vernietig. Ek kon myself nie teen sy arsenaal verdedig nie.

Dit is nie dat ek niks gehad het om te sê nie; my kop was vol woorde. My tong het egter dikwels vasgesteek soos 'n bom met 'n foutiewe slagdoppie en dit sou my weerloos laat teen die intensiteit en verskeidenheid van sy vuurvermoë. Die probleem het begin toe ek in graad vyf was.

“Waarom is jou rekenkundepunte laer as al die ander?” bulder my pa toe hy na my rapport kyk.

“Ek ... ek ... kan nie – ”

“Hou op! Jy klink soos 'n volslae idioot!” Pa staar na my met sy hofuitdrukking en ek kan dit nie waag om weg te kyk nie, kan dit nie waag om te huil nie. Hy druk die rapport onder my neus. “Ek het jou 'n vraag gevra.”

Die woorde is reg in my gedagtes. Ek weet wat ek vir hom wil sê. Die knope wat egter soos 'n nes vol slange in my maag draai, versprei na my tong en verlam dit. “M-... my j-juffrou – ”

“Spoeg dit uit! Wat is fout met jou? Wil jy hê mense moet dink jy is 'n moroon?”

Hoe meer hy tekere gaan, hoe meer hakkel ek, en hoe meer ek hakkel, hoe meer gaan hy tekere. Ek raak so senuweeagtig dat my spraakprobleem vinnig van die huis oorwaai na die skool sodat die ander seuns my begin na-aap en spot. Ek reageer met my vuiste. Die straf wat ek by die skool kry, is niks in vergelyking met die straf om my pa daardie aand in die oë te kyk nie. Die grootste doel in my lewe is om sy goedkeuring te wen – indien ek dit verloor, sou ek alle betekenis verloor. In die beste tye voer ek 'n koue bestaan en bak ek in die louwarmte en dowwe strale van sy seëninge. Om selfs dié skamele winterson te verloor, sou beteken om 'n kil donkerde te ly wat ondraaglik sou wees. Ek trotseer hom bewend in sy studeerkamer.

“Ek sou van die seun van 'n onnosele immigrant verwag om sy vuiste te gebruik,” begin hy. “Beslis nie my seun nie. Ek het my seun behoorlik opgevoed om sy brein te gebruik ten einde van sy vyande ontslae te raak, hetsy in die werklikheid of in sy verbeelding. Dalk het ek 'n fout gemaak. Dalk was dit toe nie my seun wat homself by hierdie opskudding laat betrek het nie?” Toe ek by die vertrek ingekom het, het hy nog nie een oomblik na my gekyk nie, maar toe hy nou die laaste woord sê, kyk hy my uiteindelik stip in die oë. Sy blik laat my vries.

“Nee, M-Meneer.”

“Praat harder!” bulder hy.

“Dit w-was e-ek, Meneer.”

“Hou op daarmee! Jy weet hoeveel ek jou idiotiese gehakkel haat.” Ek knik. Dit lyk of hy tevrede is daarmee. “Nou, sal jy my inlig omtrent die rede vir jou vernederende gedrag?” Hy hou die hoof se brief, wat die insident ten volle beskryf, in sy goed versorgde hand.

Woorde daver soos 'n sleg gedissiplineerde weermag deur my brein, stamp mekaar om terwyl hulle om 'n posisie veg, stapel op in verwarring en wanorde. Baie min van hulle kom ooit oor my lippe. “H-... hulle het my g-... geterg.”

“Wat? G-geterg? Waarom sal enigiemand jou t-terg?”

My mond gaan oop. My lippe beweeg. Ek dwing my stem om te praat, te verduidelik, maar niks kom uit nie. Ek voel siek en haat myself.

“Gee pad voor my indien jy jou soos 'n imbesiel gaan gedra!” skree hy.

Ek vlug badkamer toe en bring op.

Later gedra die woorde hulleself toe hulle uitmarsjeer tot op papier en ordelike sinne en frases



vorm. Ek skryf briewe waarin ek om verskoning vra aan die seuns wat ek aangeval het, aan my onderwysers en die skoolhoof, aan my pa. Ek haal voorbeelde uit die letterkunde en geskiedenis aan om te wys ek verstaan my dwaasheid. Ek vra nederig vir hulle vergifnis. Daarna werk ek harder as ooit tevore om die lang reis aan te pak terug na my pa se goedgunstigheid, terwyl ek myself in die geheim warm maak langs die klein vure van tevredenheid wat ek in my skryfwerk vind.

Ek leer om net die nodige by die skool te sê. Party van my onderwysers het simpatie en laat my toe om in my veilige hawe van stilte te bly, maar die meeste laat dit nie toe nie. Die meeste van my onderwysers ken my pa en oupa as vooraanstaande, magtige mans wat ook hulle privaat en eksklusiewe seunskool bygewoon het en ook 'n groot bydrae lewer tot hulle alumni-fonds. Ten einde op te maak vir my verlamde tong leer ek skryf, en wanneer ek myself eers op papier uitgedruk het, kan ek dit voorlees sonder om te hinkel. Gewapen met 'n woordeboek en tesourus is my arsenaal byna net so vol soos my pa s'n, selfs al kort die voordrag sy krag.

Die somer nadat ek klaar is met graad vyf is een van die warmstes ooit. My pa stuur my na my oom en tannie se plaas om van die koorsagtige hitte weg te kom wat soos 'n kombors oor die stad hang. Tannie June, my ma se jongste suster, het "in haar dwaasheid benede haar getrou" en bly saam met haar man en vyf kinders op 'n plaas. Indien tannie June regtig 'n fout gemaak het, sien ek geen teken daarvan nie. Die drie somers wat ek saam met hulle liefdevolle, tevrede gesin deurbring, is die gelukkigste dae van my lewe. Ek hou heeltemal op met hinkel. Ek bring 'n groot deel van die tyd deur terwyl ek Herman Walters se avontuurverhale verorber en vir 'n klein rukkie kan ek my eie stotterende onbekwaamheid en selfveragting vergeet terwyl ek vreesloos saam met Walter se helde koning kraai. Sy boeke neem my na plekke ver buite my pa se bereik. Toe gaan sit ek skielik vol selfvertroue – iets wat baie selde gebeur – op my oom en tannie se voorstoep en terwyl die sonbesies skree, skryf ek my eie avontuurverhaal.

Die aand toe ek terugkeer stad toe roep my pa my na sy studeerkamer om vir hom 'n volledige verslag van my somer te gee. Ek vat die notaboek vol woorde saam met die hoop dat dit namens my sal verduidelik.

"Wat het jy die hele somer lank gedoen?" vra hy heel vriendelik. Ek wys vir hom die notaboek. "Wat is dit dié?"

"Ek het 'n storie g-geskryf. Dit g-gaan oor s-seerowers en –"

Maar hy lees dit reeds, kyk vlugtig na die eerste bladsy, blaai dan na die volgende, blaai weer en weer. My pa kan baie vinnig lees. Hy lees elke oggend *The New York Journal*, *The Boston Globe* en *The New York Times* nog voordat ek my speken eiers kan opeet.

"Dit is platvloerse, sentimentele gemors," sê hy toe hy 'n paar oomblikke later my notaboek toeklap. "Ek moes geweet het daardie dwaas wat jy jou oom noem, sal jou aanspoor om so iets te doen."

Hy verrys statig uit sy stoel uit en vat my avontuurverhaal kombuis toe. Cora, ons kok, is druk in die vertrek besig om ons aandete op die groot koolstoof voor te berei. My pa vat een van die stoof se chroomoptellers met sy groot hand vas en lig die plaat daarmee op.

"Dit is wat ons met gemors doen."

Ek sien die vlamme binne-in die stoof en roep uit: "Nee!"

Maar hy gooi my notaboek ongeërg in die vuur en sit die deksel hard terug op sy plek. Ek hardloop by die kombuis uit, wetend dat my pa vinnig iets oor my trane sal sê. Die geluid van daardie gietysterplaat wat toeklap, eggo van daardie dag af in my hart. In die jare daarna sou ek dikwels in die oggend in die bed lê en luister hoe Cora daardie plate toemaak wanneer sy die vuur stook om vir ons ontbyt te maak, en dan sou die trane kom. My skryfwerk was gemors – platvloerse, sentimentele gemors. Ek het nooit weer fiksie geskryf nie.

My pa tree nie altyd soos 'n tiran op nie. Met tye is hy 'n roemryke, skitterende, gesellige man

wat mense na hom toe aantrek op grond van hulle eie verpligting en behoefte. Belangrike mense soos die burgemeester, die goewerneur en verskeie senators en kongreslede woon die oordadige partytjies by wat my pa hou, en hulle begeerte vir sy goedkeuring lyk net so groot soos my eie. Ons almal smag meer na sy respek en bewondering as na lig en lug, wetend dat ons lewe dan eers waarlik betekenis sal hê.

Dit is moontlik om my pa se guns te wen, en ek streef met my hele hart daarna om presies dit te doen. Hy deel egter sy woorde van goedkeuring uit soos 'n gierigaard wat vir straatkinders pennies gee. 'n Brom dra aanvaarding oor; 'n effense, teësinne knik gee sy goedkeuring; 'n byna-glimlag verskyn wanneer die permanente frons op sy voorkop vir 'n oomblik lig en sy streng mond 'n reguit lyn vorm in plaas van die normale afwaartse kurwe. Ek leer om dit alles te herken as uitdrukkings van lofprysing, en ek streef daarna om dit te verdien soos 'n monnik wat getrou na reinheid streef.

Aangesien my pa se enigste passie buiten politiek en die hofsaal bofbal is, begin ek die sport speel toe ek in die hoërskool is. "*Meneer, sal jy na my wedstryd kom kyk?*" oefen ek weer en weer om die woorde reg uit te spreek en smag daarna om hom te vra, maar ek weet ek sal nooit verder as "*s-sal*" of "*j-jy*" vorder sonder om te hinkel nie. In plaas daarvan los ek afskrifte van my wedstrydskeedule op plekke waar hy dit besluit moet sien. Die hele seisoen gaan verby en sy regspraktyk en politieke bedrywighede hou hom te besig om te kom.

Een wonderbaarlike dag besluit hy tog om te kom. Dit is ons span se laaste gewone wedstryd van die seisoen en ons is gelykop met ons grootste vyand om die kampioenskap te wen. Dit is juis die wedyering teen dié spesifieke span, wat al sedert my pa se tyd by die skool hulle grootste opponent is, wat my pa uit sy kantoor lok.

Ek val byna flou as gevolg van senuwees toe ek hom op die pawiljoen sien sit, maar ek herstel gou toe ek beseft dat dit is my langverwagte geleentheid om hom trots te laat voel op my. Ek speel daardie middag harder en beter as nog ooit tevore in my lewe; ek duik oor die gras en strek my arm uit om 'n grondbal te vang; ek hardloop vir al wat ek werd is om die derde bof te haal; ek slaan 'n noodsaaklike bal vir die enkellopie wat die telling gelykop maak. Maar ek is nie die ster nie. Ons gooiër, Paul Abbott, is duidelik die ster.

"Daardie gooiër van julle is 'n uitstekende speler," sê my pa daardie aand aan die etenstafel. Dit is die eerste opmerking wat hy oor die wedstryd maak. Ek wag vir meer, hou onbewustelik my asem op terwyl hy 'n stuk vleis sny en dit dan ingedagte kou. "Ek sou sê jy het nog 'n lang pad om te gaan voordat jy so goed sal wees soos hy."

Vernietigende woorde. Ek wou net een pryswoord hoor – "Goeie werk, seun" of "Ek is trots op jou" – maar my beste pogings in bofbal skiet ver tekort. Ek het nooit weer gespeel nie. My pa se opinie was van almal s'n vir my die belangrikste, en as hy sê ek is 'n mislukking, dan sien ek myself as een.

Op hoërskool het een van my Engels-onderwysers my oorreed om vir die skoolkoerant te skryf. "Jy skryf so pragtig, so foutloos," het hy volgehou en ek het sy lofprysing opgeslurp soos iemand wat deur die woestyn gedwaal het water drink. Ek skryf toe vir die skoolkoerant – noukeurige, skoon verslaggewing wat niks van myself op die spel plaas nie. Ek is in my junior en senior jaar die koerant se redakteur – die jongste leerder in die skool se geskiedenis om dié eer te beurt te val. My pa weet nooit daarvan nie. Ek is te bang om hom te vertel; bang dat hy my pogings gemors sal noem en my van die waardigheid sal beroof wat ek voel elke keer wanneer ek my werk, my naam, in druk sien.

My pa se houvas op my word al hoe sterker namate ek ouer word. Teen die tyd dat ek klaar is met hoërskool draai my lewe om syne soos 'n planeet wat om die son wentel, gevange gehou aan sy wil deur die onversetlike aantrekkingskrag van sy persoonlikheid. Ek sal enigiets sê, enigiets doen wat hy van my vra. Ek sal aan die universiteit gaan studeer waar hy studeer het, ek sal

myself voorberei om 'n student van die regs fakulteit te wees, ek sal later 'n loopbaan in die politiek volg. My pa ignoreer die feit dat iemand wat so erg hinkel soos ek nooit in die regte of politiek suksesvol sal wees nie. Hy glo hy kan my tong deur die brute krag van sy wil verander – sy wil oorheers tog in alle ander opsigte.

Op universiteit is die skryfkursusse my gunsteling en ek skryf weer in die geheim vir die koerant. My pa sien nooit die toekennings wat ek vir joernalistiek wen nie. Weg van sy invloed, vasgevang in die opwinding en uitdagings van die lewe op kampus, ervaar ek vir die eerste keer die vae gevoel van vertroue in myself. Ek kan goed skryf. Ek put oneindige genot uit skryf. Ek wil dit vir die res van my lewe doen. Ek haat al die vakke wat my voorberei om later regte te studeer. Die vooruitsig op spraakklas vul my met vrees. So keer ek aan die einde van elke jaar terug huis toe na 'n aaklige vakansiewerk in my pa se kantoor, vasbeslote om aan hom te verduidelik presies hoe baie ek die idee haat van prokureur word; vasbeslote om hom die waarheid te vertel: Ek wil my hoofvak na joernalistiek verander.

Die woorde kom nooit. Terug in my bekende wentelbaan voel ek miserabel by die gedagte dat ek hom moet teleurstel. Ek het so 'n groot behoefte aan sy goedkeuring dat ek enigiets sal doen, enigiets sal sê om dit te kry. So gaan ek elke jaar terug universiteit toe en berei my voor om uiteindelik regte te studeer.

Ek graduateer met lof. By die gradeplegtigheid aanvaar ek my pa se goedkeurende knik soos 'n honger man 'n stuk muurde brood aanvaar – honger vir meer, maar dankbaar vir die krummels wat ek wel kan kry. Ek is aanvaar om aan dieselfde regs fakulteit te gaan studeer as waar hy en my oupa studeer het. Ek sal die volgende jaar begin.

Ek werk daardie somervakansie weer in hulle regspraktik en aangesien my pa betrokke is by 'n belangrike komende verkiesingsveldtog, werk ek dikwels ekstra ure by die party se hoofkantoor om koevert te vul. My pa het my nog nooit genooi om die geheime politieke manewering waar te neem wat agter geslote deure plaasvind nie, maar kort voordat ek sou teruggaan universiteit toe om regte te studeer, roep hy my een aand na sy rook gevulde konferensiesaal. Die beeld van soveel belangrike mans om een tafel laat my stomverbaas staan, maar die ongelooflike woorde wat daardie aand uit my pa se mond vloei, laat my sprakeloos.

“My seun het 'n goeie skryftalent,” sê hy vir die ander mans. “Hy is die jongste leerder ooit wat as sy hoërskool se redakteur gedien het en die artikels wat hy vir die universiteitskoerant geskryf het, het talle toekennings gewen. Ek dink hy is die man wat ons kan help.”

Ek moet teen 'n tafel leun om te keer dat ek omval. Hy weet! My pa weet nog die hele tyd van my skryfwerk en hy is nie kwaad nie. Toe hy egter die woorde sê wat ek nog my lewe lank wag om te hoor, slaan dit my asem weg.

“Ja, ek is baie trots op my seun.”

Hy is trots op my! Dit is die eerste keer in my lewe dat my pa my prys, en dit nogal teenoor sy kollegas. Ek vlieg so naby aan die son, baai in die hitte van sy vleiers, dat die helderheid my blind maak vir die waarheid van wat volgende sou kom.

“Ons het jou hulp nodig met iets, seun ...”

Vir die volgende paar ure voer my pa en sy kollegas my lasterlike inligting oor een van hulle politieke opponente en ek skryf alles neer, verskerp en slyp my skryfwerk totdat dit 'n dodelike wapen is. Ek word gewillig hulle slypskutter, gehuur om hulle vyand se karakter te vernietig.

Twee dae later verskyn my artikel op pamflette wat op 'n geheimnisvolle wyse oor die hele stad versprei. My pa en sy partylede kan natuurlik met alle eerlikheid sweer dat hulle nie die veroordelende woorde geskryf het nie – ek het. As prokureurs was hulle versigtig om nie lasterlik te wees nie, maar my werk is 'n meesterstuk van insinuasies en skindernuus wat genoeg twyfel in mense se gedagtes veroorsaak om die opponente se reputasie te vernietig. Hy sal sy goeie naam én die verkiesing verloor.

Ek was met ontsetting vervul oor wat ek gedoen het. Ek het woorde op dieselfde manier gebruik as my pa en oupa. My woorde is gebruik om mense seer te maak en te bedrieg en te vernietig. Ek het die reëls van goeie joernalistiek oortreë, die waarheid ter wille van mag verander en oorskadu. Ek haat myself. Erger nog, ek haat my pa. Ek het hom toegelaat om my te verlei, my te oortreë.

Toe ek die huis die volgende dag verlaat, dink my pa ek gaan tien dae vroeër terug universiteit toe om alles agtermekaar te kry vir die nuwe jaar. In plaas daarvan loop ek weg en sluit by die weermag aan. Ek skryf eers vir hom nadat ek my basiese opleiding voltooi het, toe dit heeltemal te laat vir my magtige pa of oupa is om enigiets te verander. Ten spyte van my naskoolse studies wil ek niks met offisersopleiding te doen hê nie. Ek het saam met plaasseuns en immigrante se seuns by die weermag aangesluit met die hoop om myself tussen hulle te verloor.

Sewe maande ná my aansluiting, op 6 April 1917, betree Amerika die Groot Oorlog. Die weermag stuur my en my vriende Frankryk toe om onder generaal Pershing in die Amerikaanse ekspedisieleër te dien. Hulle laat ons op 4 Julie deur Parys marsjeer en plaas ons dan uit na opleidingskampe om die werklikheid van sandsak-skuilings en modderge vulde loopgrawe te beleef – toestande wat ons binnekort eerstehands op die Westelike front sou ervaar.

Hulle gee vir my 'n 0,3-kaliber Springfield-geweer om teen die vyand te veg, maar ek het geen wapens teen die wanhoop en vernietiging van oorlogvoering nie; geen verdediging teen die werklikheid van koplose lyke wat soos verminkte poppe rondlê, van stede en woude wat niks meer is as ruïnes en afgebrande stompe, van kinders wat honger ly nie. Ek verduur die gruwel van sien hoe individuele lewens – manne wat ek ken en leer liefkry het – niks meer word as onpersoonlike “magte” wat vir militêre doelwitte geoffer word nie. Ek weet ek kan hierdie beelde in meer hanteerbare proporsies verander deur daaroor te skryf, maar ek het moord gepleeg met my woorde en nou moet ek die volle straf vir my misdaad dra. Ek word gereinig van my sonde by die slag van Cantigny op 28 Mei 1918, by Belleau Wood van 4 tot 26 Junie en by St. Mihiel op 12 September. Dit is waar

Dit is waar Gabe se verhaal ophou. Dit is nogal ontstellende leesstof voor slaaptyd. Tesame met alles wat dié dag gebeur het, maak ek die aand nie 'n oog toe nie.

Vroeg die volgende oggend gaan ek sag af ondertoe om 'n pot koffie te maak. Die herfslug is koel, die perfekte weer om my appels 'n mooi rooi blos te gee, maar ek beweer toe ek dink aan die naderende winter. Ek gooi 'n paar stukkies hout in die stoof om vuur te maak en toe ek die gietysterplaat terug op sy plek laat sak, dink ek weer aan Gabe se verhaal.

Terwyl hy siek in my spaarkamer gelê het, moes hy elke oggend gehoor het hoe ek die plate oop- en toemaak. As die verhaal wat ek gisteraand gelees het waar is, moes die geluid pynlike herinneringe by hom laat opkom het. Ek onthou hoe Gabe oor sy pa gehuil het die aand toe hy ylend was van koors en hom om vergifnis gesmeek het. Waar ek by die kombuistafel sit, skiet my oë vol tranes en ek onthou hoe ek ook in woede van my eie pa af weg is.

Die spaarkamer se deur gaan oop en tannie Batty kom uit. Sy het haar kanariegeel trui bo-oor haar nagrok aan en haar hare staan in alle rigtings. Ek lyk seker net so deurmekaar en my oë net so pap soos hare, want sy kom staan

langs my stoel en gee my 'n druk, laat rus haar wang op my hare.

“Ek het ook nie goed geslaap nie, Toots,” sê sy. “Ek het die hele nag lank vir daardie arme seun gebid; gebid dat God hom sal help om die regte ding te doen, waarmee hy ook al worstel.”

Ek besef tannie Batty weet nog nie alles wat ek van Gabe weet nie. Ek het nie vir haar vertel wat sheriff Foster gesê het nie. Ek kon myself gister nie sover bring om die woorde hardop te sê nie. Tog het Gabe tannie Batty se hart ook gesteel. Sy het die reg om die waarheid oor hom te weet. “Tannie Batty moet liever sit. Ek moet Tannie iets vertel.”

Sy gooi stil vir haar 'n koppie koffie in en kom sit dan oorkant my by die tafel waar sy die suiker al in die rondte met 'n teelepel roer. Ek trek my asem diep in, net soos Gabe altyd gemaak het wanneer hy gereedgemaak het sodat ek sy been kon dokter. Wanneer ek die woorde hardop sê, sal dit seker my wonde van voor af laat oopskeur.

“Die sheriff het vir my gesê Gabe het Matthew se naam en sy identiteit gebruik toe hy in Chicago gewoon het. Dit lyk of Gabe alles omtrent Matthew weet: sy geboortedatum en sy ouers se name en baie ander goed. Ek het al begin dink hy is regtig Matthew.”

“Nee, het ek nie vir jou gesê hy is nie Matthew nie? Matthew het die eerste lit van 'n vinger verloor toe hy 'n seun was en dit het altyd so lelik gelyk. Gabe het baie mooi hande, of hoe?”

Ek staar na die tafelblad en probeer tevergeefs om die beeld van Gabe se hande uit my gedagtes te kry.

“Die polisie is agterdogtig, tannie Batty. Hulle wil weet wat van die regte Matthew geword het. Hy het verdwyn en hulle dink Gabe het iets daarmee te doen. Ek het in Gabe se sak gekrap en van sy stories gelees terwyl hy siek was, en die sheriff is reg. Hy weet alles omtrent Matthew Wyatt. Hy het geskryf oor hoe Willie deur die ys geval het en dood is. Hy het ook vir Frank Wyatt tot in die fynste detail beskryf. Hy het ook geweet Frank was nie Matthew se regte pa nie.”

Tannie Batty dink vir 'n oomblik daaroor na voordat sy sê: “Hy het dalk iewers vir Matthew ontmoet. Dalk het Matthew self al dié dinge vir Gabe vertel.”

“Maar waarom sal Gabe dan Matthew se naam en sy identiteit steel? Sheriff Foster en meneer Wakefield dink hy het hierheen gekom om die boord van my te steel.”

Sy skud haar kop. “Ek glo dit nie. Gabe het nooit gemaak of hy Matthew is terwyl hy hier gebly het nie. Hy het vir ons gesê hy is Gabriel Harper, 'n skrywer ... en hy is regtig 'n skrywer. Hy het my van sy stories laat lees. Wat

op aarde sal 'n joernalis van Chicago met 'n vrugteboord doen?"

"Ek het gisteraand nog een van sy stories gekry. Hy het dit in die werkswinkel se stofie probeer verbrand, maar die vuur het doodgegaan. Hy moes dit iewers in die laaste twee weke geskryf het, want ek het daardie notaboek onlangs vir hom gekoop. Die storie sê sy pa is 'n prokureur in die stad wat wou gehad het hy moet ook 'n prokureur word. Gabe wou egter 'n skrywer word en daarom het hy weggeloop en by die weermag aangesluit. Ek weet nie of hy hierdie keer die waarheid vertel of nie."

Tannie Batty sug. "Ek het eenkeer 'n storie geskryf oor hoe ek in die oerwoude van Afrika deur mensvreterers gevang word wat 'n trofee van my kop wil maak en ek het nog nooit 'n voet in Afrika gesit nie, wat nog te sê iemand ontmoet wat my kop as 'n trofee wou hê."

"Ek wens maar net ek het geweet wat die waarheid is. Kon Gabe nie ten minste vir ons die waarheid vertel het nie?"

Tannie Batty kyk lank na my, haar hande om haar koffiebeker gevou. "Jy is verlief op Gabe, nè, Toots?"

"Nee ... ja ... ek weet nie."

"Hy is lief vir jou ook."

"Hoe weet Tannie dit?"

"Net soos ek weet dat jy hom liefhet; dit staan duidelik oor julle albei se gesigte geskryf. Ek kon sien hoe julle al twee daarteen probeer stry. 'n Mens kan egter nie teen 'n mag so sterk soos die liefde stry nie. Ek en Walter het probeer en ons het klaaglik misluk. Ek weet Gabe moet 'n baie goeie rede hê om hom te dwing om jou sommerso te verlaat."

"Dit sou beslis gehelp het as ek geweet het wat dié rede is. Ek wou nie lief word vir hom nie, tannie Batty, want ek was so bang dat juis dit sou gebeur. God hou aan om my te terg. Hy gee vir my waarna ek smag net om dit alles weer weg te vat. My ma was reg. Sy het gesê liefde is soos spookasem. Dit belowe so baie dinge, maar wanneer jy jou mond wil volmaak daarmee, is daar niks nie. Net die soet, talmende smaak – as jy een van die gelukkiges is. Ek is dan seker nie een van die gelukkiges nie, want op hierdie stadium proe die liefde vir my maar bitter. Ek het die hele nag daaroor gedink en ek het tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat God my straf omdat ek soveel leuens vertel het."

Tannie Batty kyk na my asof sy nie kan glo ek is in staat daartoe om te jok nie. "Waaroor het jy gejok, Toots?"

Haar vertroue in my pynig my gewete soos 'n korf vol woedende bye wat begin steek. Ek weet dit is hoog tyd dat ek die waarheid begin praat.

"Oor alles. Ek jok al vandat ek tien jaar gelede in Deer Springs van die

trein af geklim het. Sheriff Foster sê Gabe het vir my gejoj omdat hy die boord by my wou afvat, en as dit waar is, is dit presies wat ek verdien, want ek het presies dieselfde gedoen. Ek het Sam laat dink dat ek hom liefhet sodat ek hier 'n tuiste kon hê. Ek het ook nooit vir hom die waarheid oor myself vertel nie. Ek is 'n indringer, net soos Gabe. En nou betaal God my terug vir alles wat ek gedoen het ... ”

# Eliza's Story

*New Orleans, 1904*

“We are all strangers in a strange land, longing for home, but not quite knowing what or where home is. We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams, or as we turn a corner, and suddenly there is a strange, sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes.”

MADELEINEL' ENGLE



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**T**he clearest memory I have of my mama is the day she took me to the circus when I was the same age as my Becky Jean. We had never gone anywhere before that day—only to the corner store and back, or to the big church on the next block once in a while. That was because my mama was very sick. Most days I would play alone in our room or watch people walk by on the street below my window while Mama slept, and I'd wait for her to wake up and fix me something to eat. She couldn't eat much herself and she had grown very thin. She would sit propped up in bed sipping her medicine while she watched me eat, and sometimes a big silvery tear would roll down her cheek.

The week before we went to the circus Mama had started having nightmares. She woke up screaming that she saw snakes in our room and horrible creatures crawling up our walls, and she scared me so bad I started having nightmares, too. But the day we went to the circus she got out of bed much earlier than usual and poured herself a glass of medicine and said, "How would y'all like to go to the circus, Sugarbaby?" I never have forgotten the velvety sound of Mama's voice or her slow, easy drawl.

"What's a circus?" I asked.

Tears swam in her eyes as she held her palm against my cheek. "My poor, sweet Sugar. Y'all don't even know what a circus is." She turned away and lit a cigarette, then crossed the room to her old steamer trunk. I loved our afternoons together when she would open that trunk and take out all her beautiful, shimmering costumes. They were made of smooth, silky cloth and covered all over with sequins and

glitter and feathers and such. In one of the drawers Mama kept a little silver tiara, like a miniature crown, that glittered with make-believe diamonds. Whenever I felt sad or scared, Mama would take out that crown and let me wear it. She took it out that morning, too, and put it on my head. “My little angel,” she whispered.

One compartment in her trunk held sheet music, all yellowed and brittle with age. Mama’s hand shook as she sifted through the drawer, searching for something. I brushed cigarette ashes away as they fell on the pages, afraid they would catch on fire. When Mama didn’t find what she wanted in that drawer she tried the next one, pulling out a handful of faded programs.

“See here? That’s me, Sugar. Yvette Dupre. The Singing Angel.”

I stared for a long time at the picture of my mama in a long, sparkly dress. She wore her coppery hair piled high on her head with the little silver crown nestled on top. She had been very beautiful before she got sick.

Mama turned the page to show me more pictures—a smiling man with a top hat and a cane, a funny-looking man with a big wooden doll on his lap. “I used to sing in the Vaudeville circuit,” she said. “That’s how I met your daddy.”

I nodded as if I understood, but I didn’t. She exhaled smoke, then dug through the stack of programs until she found one with a group of men dressed in funny-looking clothes.

“That’s Henri—your daddy—right there. Handsome Henri Gerard.”

I squinted for a better look, but the picture was so tiny I couldn’t make out his face. Mama took another gulp of her medicine, then stared straight ahead for the longest time, her eyes empty and dark, her lips very pale. There was no life in her face at all, and that scared me. Sometimes she didn’t seem to remember who I was.

I touched her hand. “Mama?” Her fingers felt as cold as the bars of the radiator when our heat was turned off.

She finally gazed at me, then at the programs in front of her. She looked as if she just woke up and had no idea where she was or how she got here.

“Mama?” I said again, pulling on her sleeve.

“Hmm?”

“Is this the place we’re going to today?” I pointed to one of the leaflets.

“No, Sugarbaby. We’re going to the circus.” She suddenly came to life again, remembering, and sorted through all the programs until she found the one she wanted. It had a fancy design around the edge and red letters that had faded to rusty pink. Mama pointed to the picture on the front. “See there? That’s an elephant, Sugarbaby. I know y’all never saw an elephant before, but they’re just the most enormous things! See how tiny that woman looks beside it?”

The elephant’s head looked like a snake. I felt afraid. “Will it eat me?”

“Why no, Sugar. It’ll make you laugh. And see these clowns? They’ll make y’all laugh, too. And you’ll see men swinging from little bitty swings, way up high in the air like monkeys, and...I just know y’all will love it.” She took two more swallows of her medicine, draining the glass. When she set it down and crushed out her cigarette, I snuggled up to her. Mama drew me very close, holding me tighter than I ever remembered her holding me before, as if something awful might happen to both of us if she let go.

“You know I love you, don’t you, Sugar?” she whispered. “You know I want to be a better mama, but...y’all understand that I’m...I’m not well?”

“Yes, Mama.” In fact, she sometimes got so weak and wobbly she could hardly walk to the corner store for food or more medicine. The week before, she’d fallen coming up the stairs to our room and the lady who ran the boardinghouse had yelled and yelled at her. Said she

would have thrown Mama out in the gutter where she belonged a long time ago if it weren't for me. I tried real hard to get Mama on her feet again but I couldn't do it alone. Finally one of the other boarders, a friend of Mama's, came and helped her up to our room. I didn't like that man. He had a lot of dark, coarse hair and spoke in a strange language with Mama, and he smelled like fish. But he helped her into bed that day and she slept for a long, long time.

Yes, I knew my mama was very sick. The medicine would make her better, stronger, for a little while. She would laugh and sometimes even sing, just like an angel, but when the bottle of amber liquid was gone, Mama would be sleepy and weak and scarcely able to talk again.

"You know I love you, don't you, Sugarbaby?" she whispered again. "If I didn't love you so much I wouldn't be taking y'all to the circus this afternoon, now, would I?"

We both got dressed in our Sunday clothes, and Mama put the little crown on my head, fastening it real tight to my golden curls with hairpins so it wouldn't fall off. I felt like a princess. Mama drank one last dose of medicine for strength, then poured the rest of it into the little silver flask that she carried in her purse. We walked hand-in-hand to the corner where the streetcar stopped, then rode on it for a long, long way. When we finally got off, we walked some more until I saw a huge striped tent up ahead and heard the warble of the calliope and the excited rumble of voices.

The next few hours were the most wonderful ones I'd ever spent with my mama. I'd rarely seen her so happy and full of life, laughing and pointing to all the strange sights along the midway and in the side shows. When she saw how the cotton candy fascinated me, she gave me a nickel to buy some. It was sticky and sweet on my lips, but just when I expected to feel cotton in my mouth, it disappeared. I cried, thinking I must have done something wrong.

“Where did it go, Mama?”

“Oh, Sugarbaby, I’m so sorry. I should have warned y’all. It’s supposed to melt in your mouth. That’s what cotton candy does.” She knelt in front of me to wipe away my tears with her handkerchief. Her smile faded and she got that scary, faraway look in her eyes for a moment. “And when y’all get a little older, you’ll find out that’s what love is like, too—just like cotton candy. Your mouth will water for it, and it will promise so many things, but when you try and take your fill of love, there’ll be nothing there at all. Only a sweet, lingering taste—if you’re one of the lucky ones.”

I remember that the circus amazed me that day, but I can’t honestly recall the magic of it anymore. In later years I saw the reality behind the false front—the clowns’ painted-on smiles, the thrills that weren’t thrilling at all once you knew how they were done—and after that, everything about the circus seemed phony and cheap. Even the man-eating tiger, which had frightened me so badly on that first day, proved to be as harmless as Queen Esther and Arabella.

What I do remember about that first trip to the circus was that there was so much going on all at once in those three rings that I didn’t know where to look first. I didn’t want to miss anything so I kept asking, “What are you watching now, Mama? Which one are you looking at?”

I remember the brassy music and the relentless excitement and my mama’s beautiful laughter. I remember how she gasped when it seemed that one of the aerialists might fall, and how we both covered our eyes, then peeked between our fingers to discover that he hadn’t really fallen after all. But what remains most vivid in my mind is the eerie way my mama kept looking at me with her sad, gray eyes, and touching my hair or my cheek with her ice-cold hands and saying, “You know that I love you, don’t you, Sugar?”

When the show ended we sat on the bleachers listening to the band

play until the tent was nearly empty. Mama's bottle of medicine was empty, too. I had seen her tip the little silver flask up real high so she could get the very last drop of it. Then she pulled out her compact and a tube of lipstick and she painted her lips scarlet, blotting them on a square of toilet tissue from her purse.

"Here's a kiss for you to keep, Sugarbaby." I tucked the fragile square into my pocket and kept that imprint of her lips for a long, long time—until it finally fell apart.

As soon as the music stopped, the roustabouts streamed into the tent, causing a great ruckus as they began dismantling the bleachers and circus rings. Mama stood and took my hand in hers.

"Eliza Rose Gerard, it's time for y'all to meet your daddy."

We walked across the empty circus rings, and when we stepped outside I was surprised to see everything stripped down already. The sideshow tents, the cotton candy booth, the tent with the animals, even the ticket booths had vanished leaving a bare, trampled field where all the magic had been. Mama led me around the back of the Big Top to a smaller tent where a group of circus performers talked and laughed as they changed out of their costumes into ordinary clothes.

Then Mama pointed to the man who was my daddy.

He had bright red hair that stuck out in all directions and a bulbous red nose to match. He wore baggy plaid trousers with polka dot suspenders and a pair of shoes that seemed a mile long. He was a clown. A foolish buffoon with the Bennett Brothers Circus.

Daddy sat on a little stool in front of a mirror, talking quietly to another man as he wiped the white makeup and exaggerated smile off his face. But he stopped—froze is really the right word for it—when he looked up and saw my mother.

"Hello, Henri," she said. Mama was the only person I've ever heard pronounce Daddy's name the French way. Everyone else called him

Henry.

“Yvette?” He sounded astonished and not at all sure it was really her. I remembered how different Mama had looked when she was called the Singing Angel, before she got so sick and needed bottles and bottles of medicine. No wonder Daddy didn’t recognize her, thin as she was now.

Mama poked at her hair as if she could push it around and make it beautiful again, as if she wished she still wore it piled high on her head like in the picture. “Don’t you know your own wife, Henri?” she said with a tiny laugh. “Or your baby daughter?”

Daddy glanced at the other man, then back at Mama before looking away. His cheeks turned nearly as scarlet as his hair. The other man quickly stuffed his costume into a trunk and disappeared like some kind of magic act. Daddy fumbled to pull off his nose and wig, then wiped off the last of his makeup with a towel before finally looking up at me. He tried to smile.

“She...she’s grown since I saw her last.”

“I should think so. Y’all have been gone more than two years, Henri. She’ll be five years old on her next birthday, won’t you, Sugarbaby?”

I didn’t answer. I simply stared and stared at this stranger who was my daddy. Now that he’d taken his makeup off, I thought he was the most handsome man I’d ever seen—so different from all the men who came to our boardinghouse to visit Mama and bring her medicine. He had shiny black hair that he wore slicked back beneath his wig, and his shoulders looked very wide, his torso ramrod straight and muscular beneath his outlandish outfit. He still hadn’t moved from where he sat when we first approached.

“What do you want, Yvette?” he asked. “Didn’t you get the money I sent?” For a reason I couldn’t understand, he seemed afraid of us.

“Is there someplace we could go and talk, Henri? I could use a

cigarette.”

Daddy stood and stripped off his costume and funny shoes, stuffing everything into one of the wardrobe trunks. He wore an undershirt and a normal pair of trousers beneath it. He never said one word as he put on his jacket and street shoes and led us across the trampled grass to a long line of rail cars, parked on a sidetrack at the edge of the field. Night had fallen and it was way past my bedtime. I don't remember much that happened after that because I was so worn out from all the excitement of the circus that I curled up on Daddy's tousled bunk and fell sound asleep while Mama and Daddy smoked cigarettes and talked and shared a bottle of her medicine.

The tiny train compartment was dark when I awoke. I didn't know where I was. I cried out in fright and Mama came out of the darkness and scooped me up in her arms. “You know I love you more than anything in the whole wide world, don't you, Sugarbaby?” she whispered.

I nodded and laid my head on her bare shoulder. She wrapped a blanket around me, then laid me down on the little banquette seat by the fold-down table where she and Daddy had sat earlier. “Go back to sleep now, Sugar.” Her breath smelled like medicine as she kissed me. I went back to sleep.

The scream of a train whistle woke me next. I sat up and looked around the moonlit room. Instead of the familiar, cracked plaster walls of the boardinghouse I saw the dark, wood-paneled walls of the train compartment. An overflowing ashtray and an empty bottle of Mama's medicine sat on the table alongside two sticky glasses. My daddy's jacket hung on a hook on the back of the door, but the rest of his clothes lay in a heap on the floor. The rail car lurched suddenly, then slowly began to move.

I looked around for my mother, but only my daddy lay sprawled on the rumpled bed. His head and one out-flung arm were all that



showed above the sheet. The bottle and glasses on the table began to clink and rattle, then the entire room began rocking from side to side as the train gathered speed.

“Mama? Mama, where are you?” I called. Whenever I would wake up alone in our room at the boardinghouse, Mama always came running from somewhere down the hall as soon as I called her. This time she didn’t come. The whistle shrieked again, a lonesome, mournful sound.

“Mama!” I wailed.

My daddy groaned and slowly sat up. He looked around groggily, then stared in disbelief when he saw me. “What the—! What are you doing here? Where’s Yvette? Yvette!”

But it was useless for either one of us to call her. Mama had no place to hide in the tiny cubicle. I saw fear in Daddy’s eyes, like I had seen the night before. He tried to climb out of bed, winding the sheet around himself, but the movement of the train, racing at full speed now, made him unsteady on his feet. He fell back onto the bed again.

“Oh, God...” he moaned. “Yvette, how could you?”

“Where’s my mama?” I cried.

Daddy scrubbed his face with his hands, then slowly lifted his head. “She left us. She’s gone.”

I was too young to understand death at the time, but a year or so later when Carlo fell off the high wire and died, and I heard his wife Bianca moaning and weeping, “He’s gone...he’s gone...how could he leave me,” and crying out to God just like my daddy had that first morning, I finally understood that my mama had died of her terrible illness. She had vanished, never to be seen again, just like Carlo. The circus train had moved on to the next town leaving no trace of either of them.

Later still, when I learned all about heaven in a Lutheran church in Lima, Ohio, I knew that Jesus held my mama safe in His arms. I felt

relieved that she would never be sick or wobbly-legged again. But on that first terrible morning as my daddy sat with his face in his hands, weeping for her, all I could do was cry along with him and hold on tight to Mama's silver tiara, which had fallen from my head during the night.

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Daddy had no idea what to do with me. For the first three days he barely looked at me, let alone held me or consoled me. "Here...eat this," he would say, and he'd slide a plate of food across the table to me, pushing it with one finger. He took his own plate outside to eat on the rail car step with his back to me. I slept on the banquette seat as the train rattled and swayed through the night, then knelt on that same seat and watched out the window as farms and woods and towns streamed past in the early dawn light. I didn't leave the car for three days, still wearing the clothes Mama had dressed me in.

When the train stopped I would watch the city of tents go up in a vacant lot somewhere or in a farmer's field. "Stay here," Daddy said in his mad voice each morning as he left for clown alley to put on his costume and makeup. I knew there were probably tigers outside and elephants with heads that looked like snakes and I was too terrified to leave the car. Thank goodness Aunt Peanut finally took pity on me, or I don't know what might have become of me. She happened to walk by and see me looking out the window just as Daddy was leaving one morning.

"For crying out loud, Henry!" she said in her squeaky, midget voice. "You can't keep the kid cooped up in here for the rest of her life! She's a living, breathing human being! And your own flesh-and-blood, to boot!"

"You've got to help me, Peanut," Daddy begged. "I don't know what to do with her...or what she needs."

“Well, first of all she needs a little lovin’ now and then, just like we all do.” Aunt Peanut climbed up on the seat beside me and gathered me into her stubby arms. She was not much bigger than I was, a tiny creature with a woman’s body and lipstick and rouge on her face. Such a grotesque stranger would have frightened me if I hadn’t been so lonely for my mama. Longing for comfort, I hugged Peanut tightly and wept.

“See, Henry?” she said. “See? That’s all the kid needs...just a little lovin’.”

“Her mother’s gone, Peanut, and I don’t know what to do with her. Will you take her for me?”

“Take her? She’s your daughter!”

“I know she’s my daughter,” Daddy said angrily, “but there’s no room for her here, no place for her in my life.”

“There’s more room in here with you than there is in my sleeping car. You want her crowded in there with no light or air and bunks full of women stacked clear to the ceiling?”

“I don’t want her here at all,” he said, pacing in the tiny space.

“A circus is no place to raise a child.”

“Lazlo and Sylvia have children, and so do—”

“That’s not what I mean. I know there are children here, but they’ll all grow up to perform in the circus—they’ll marry other performers. I don’t want her to have a life like her mother’s or mine. I want a real life for her, not one spent on the road ten months a year, living out of a steamer trunk.”

Aunt Peanut stroked my hair. “That kind of life isn’t going to fall out of the sky, Henry. You have to give it to her.”

“I can’t! *This* is what I do! I’m a circus clown, not a shopkeeper or a clerk in a bank. I had no intention of becoming a father. It happened by accident...so I married Yvette, and now she’s gone and—”

“And you’re a father,” she said sharply. “And unless you’re planning

on leaving your kid in an orphanage somewhere, you're going to have to be a father to her, Henry."

"I don't know how!" he shouted. The sound made my skin prickle. It was one of only half a dozen times in my life that I ever recall my daddy shouting. Aunt Peanut released me and hopped off the banquette to go to him, laying her hand on his arm to soothe him.

"Didn't you have a father of your own?" she asked gently.

"He died when I was eight." Daddy snatched his derby off the table and jammed it onto his head. "I don't have time for this, Peanut. I'm going to be late for the parade, and I'm not even in costume yet." He yanked the door open.

"Just be the daddy you always wished you'd had, Henry."

Daddy froze in the doorway, then slowly turned to stare at her. He looked as though he'd been slapped. "What did you say?"

"That's really all there is to it. If you wished your daddy had tucked you into bed at night, then tuck her in. If you wished your daddy had taken you on his knee and told you stories, then tell her stories."

He took his hat off, raked his fingers through his glossy hair a few times, then jammed it back on his head again. He seemed unable to speak.

"Teach her right from wrong, Henry. The Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule. You *have* heard of those, haven't you?"

"Yes...my mother was a good Christian woman." He spoke so softly I barely heard him. "She raised us by the Good Book. That's why I married Yvette after...when I found out she was in a family way."

"Then you'll do just fine," Aunt Peanut said, patting his arm. "Go on now, before you miss your wagon. I can probably skip the parade for once. I'll take the kid around with me today."

"No! Not to the freak show—" "Why not?" She was suddenly angry. "If the circus is going to be her home, then she needs to learn that freaks like me are people, too. Or are you ashamed to have her meet

your ‘family,’ Henry?”

“I’m sorry...I didn’t mean—” “Get out of here before I lose my temper.”

She pointed her stubby finger at the door. Daddy left. Aunt Peanut packed an awful lot of explosive for a tiny little woman. But she also had a heart that was twice as big as most other people’s. She reached for my hand.

“What’s your name, honey?”

“Eliza Rose.”

“Mmm. Your name is as pretty as you are. Come on, I’ll show you around your new hometown.”

I soon saw that it *was* like a town—a self-contained city of tents that magically moved from place to place during the night. There was the cookhouse where the chefs prepared all our meals; two dining tents, one for the performers and the other for the laborers; a wardrobe tent; a barbershop and laundry; tents for the elephants and other livestock; and a huge, elongated tent called the pad room, which had the men’s and women’s changing rooms on opposite ends and a stable for the performing horses in the middle.

These were the private areas of our tent city, but there were also public areas—the tents that were part of the show, such as the Big Top and the Midway. The marquee was the main entrance to the Big Top and the menagerie tent, where ticket holders could view all the exotic animals. The Midway had the sideshow tents on the left, the concession stands and ticket wagons on the right.

“My main job is here at the sideshow,” Aunt Peanut explained that first day. She pointed to the banner line that advertised the attractions inside the tent, and the huge picture of Peanut looked taller than she was. “I’m Queen Lily,” she said with a humorless chuckle, “the world’s tiniest woman and Queen of the Lilliputians. Then I change costumes for one of the clown routines with your father where I’m

called ‘Peanut’—but that comes later in the show.”

She boosted me up on a little stage near the entrance to the tent. “Now you’re on the bally platform,” she said. “They’ll stand one or two of us freaks out here to give the people a free look. That always makes them want to spend their money to come inside.”

Aunt Peanut lifted me off the platform with a grunt and reached for my hand, but when I saw where she was about to lead me I stopped short. Mama had taken me inside the sideshow tent a few days ago and my first glimpse had frightened me so badly I’d buried my head in her shoulder and refused to look.

“What’s the matter, honey, you scared?” Aunt Peanut asked. “You don’t need to be. The Abominable Snowman is really a dead stuffed Alaskan bear that’s so old and moldy we have to keep pasting his fur back on.” She took both my hands in hers and dragged me inside against my will, talking the whole time in her squeaky voice. “The two-headed calf was real once upon a time, but see? It’s dead and stuffed, too.”

“Is the snake real?” I whispered, hardly daring to look. A huge boa constrictor lay coiled in a glass box on the stage beside the calf, miles and miles of the scaly creature, as big around as a man’s arm.

“Yeah, but it won’t hurt you. Sylvia keeps it so well fed it just sleeps all the time. She drapes it all around herself for the show and the thing’s as sluggish as the Mississippi. Let’s go around to the back and I’ll introduce you to the others.”

I was glad to get out of that tent, but the little group of people standing in back, talking and smoking cigarettes, looked every bit as scary as the creatures inside.

“Hey, everybody, this is Henry Gerard’s daughter,” Aunt Peanut said. “Her name is Eliza Rose and she’s going to be traveling with us for a while.”

They all smiled at me and greeted me with, “Welcome, Eliza,” and

“Nice to have you, honey,” but my heart pounded with fright as I tried to hide behind Aunt Peanut’s skirts. Sylvia the snake woman was covered from head to toe with tattoos. Gloria the fat lady was the most enormous person I’d ever seen, with legs the size of tree trunks and a dress that could fit an elephant. One of the men in the group was so grotesque I hid my face. He had pure white hair on his pink scalp, and bulbous pink eyes, and skin that was nearly transparent. The bannerline claimed he came from a rare tribe of underground people, descendants from a marooned spaceship from Mars, but I learned when I grew older that Albert was really an albino. The only ordinary-looking person in the whole group was the rubber lady—a contortionist who looked fine standing still, but as soon as the sideshow started she would twist her body into knots like a pretzel.

I longed to run back to the safety of my daddy’s train compartment, but I didn’t know my way through the maze of tents. My new home and new family were so strangely bizarre they overwhelmed me. I’d never ventured more than a few blocks from the boardinghouse with Mama, and up until she started having nightmares, my limited world had remained very safe. Now it seemed as though I’d stepped inside one of Mama’s nightmares.

“Goodness, you’re shaking like a leaf!” Aunt Peanut said as she tried to pry my fingers off her skirts. “I guess you can’t stay here with me, after all. If I went up on stage with you clinging to me like this, they’d have to bill us as Siamese twins!”

I heard them all talking about me in low voices, asking Aunt Peanut about my mama and trying to figure out who could take care of me once the sideshow opened for business. They couldn’t seem to decide what should be done with me, and they argued for such a long time that pretty soon we all heard the parade heading back to the circus grounds.

“I guess I’d better take you back to your father,” Aunt Peanut finally

said.

Daddy sat high atop a fancy parade wagon, pulled by a team of four Percheron horses. I recognized him by the red nose and wig and the gigantic shoes. He and the other clowns started climbing down as soon as the wagon came to a stop beside the pad room. Daddy seemed startled when Aunt Peanut marched right up to him with me in tow, as if he'd forgotten all about me.

"You were right, Henry," she said. "The sideshow scared her. She'd better stay with you."

He looked as though he wanted to run away. His clown face was smiling but his real face wasn't. "Listen, I don't know—"

"And don't you dare lock her away in your compartment again!"

Aunt Peanut hoisted me up with a grunt and flung me at my father so suddenly that he had no choice but to catch me in his arms. Peanut turned to go.

"No, wait!" Daddy said. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

"Hold her, Henry," she called over her shoulder as she toddled away. "Just hold her!"

At first my daddy's arms were as cold and stiff as the stuffed Alaskan bear's in the sideshow, but as I buried my face against his chest and cried for my mama I felt his body slowly relax.

"I know...I know..." he murmured, and soon he wasn't simply holding me but hugging me, patting my back and gently rocking me to soothe my tears. He smelled of greasepaint and cigarettes and the Macassar oil he always used to slick back his real hair.

"Everything's going to be all right," he promised. "You don't need to cry...."



# DEEL VIII

## Eliza se verhaal

*New Orleans 1904*

Ons is almal vreemdelinge in 'n vreemde land wat huis toe  
verlang terwyl ons nie regtig weet wat of waar dit is nie.  
Ons sien dit soms vlugtig in ons drome of wanneer ons om  
'n hoek gaan en dan is daar skielik so 'n vreemde,  
soet bekendheid wat net so vinnig verdwyn as wat dit verskyn het.

Madeleine L'Engle

## ~ Hoofstuk sestien ~

Die duidelikste herinnering wat ek van my ma het, is van die dag toe sy my sirkus toe gevat het. Ek was toe so oud soos my Becky Jean nou is. Voor daardie dag het ons nog nooit iewers heen gegaan nie; net na die winkel op die hoek en terug, of af en toe na die groot kerk 'n blok van ons huis af. Die rede is omdat my ma baie siek was. Ek sou die meeste dae alleen in ons kamer speel of deur die venster kyk hoe mense buite in die straat verbyloop terwyl Mamma slaap. Ek sou wag totdat sy wakker word sodat sy vir my iets kon maak om te eet. Sy kon self nie baie eet nie en het baie maer geword. Sy het regop in haar bed gaan sit en haar medisyne gedrink terwyl sy gekyk het hoe ek eet, en soms het 'n groot traan oor haar wang gerol.

Die week voordat ons sirkus toe is, het Mamma nagmerries begin kry. Sy sou skreeuend wakker word en sê sy sien slange in ons kamer en aaklige wesens teen ons mure. Sy het my so bang gemaak dat ek ook nagmerries begin kry het. Op die dag wat ons sirkus toe is, het sy baie vroeër as gewoonlik opgestaan, vir haarself 'n glas medisyne ingegooi en toe sê sy: “Wat sê jy daarvan as ons sirkus toe gaan, skattebol?” Ek kon nog nooit die fluweelagtige geluid van Mamma se stem of haar stadige, dralende uitspraak vergeet nie.

“Wat is 'n sirkus?” vra ek.

Trane wel in haar oë op en sy druk haar handpalm teen my wang. “My arme, dierbare skattebol. Jy weet nie eens wat 'n sirkus is nie.” Sy draai weg en steek 'n sigaret aan, dan stap sy deur die vertrek tot by haar ou reistrommel. Ek is mal oor ons namiddae saam wanneer sy daardie trommel oopmaak en al haar pragtige, blink kostuums uithaal. Dit is gemaak van gladde, syagtige materiaal en versier met blinkers en vere. In een van die laaie bêre Mamma 'n klein silwer tiara wat soos 'n klein kroontjie lyk en dit blink van die nagemaakte diamante waarmee dit versier is. Wanneer ek hartseer of bang voel, haal Mamma altyd die kroon uit en laat my toe om dit op te sit. Sy haal dit dié oggend ook uit en sit dit op my kop. “My klein engeltjie,” fluister sy.

Op die een rakkie in haar trommel is daar bladmusiek, vergeel en bros van ouderdom. Mamma se hand bewe terwyl sy deur die laai na iets soek. Ek vee die sigaretas weg toe dit op die bladsye val, bang dat die papier sal begin brand. Toe Mamma nie in die laai kry waarna sy soek nie, probeer sy die

volgende een en haal 'n stapel dowwe programme uit.

“Sien jy dit? Dit is ek, skattebol. Yvette Dupre. Die Singende Engel.”

Ek staan lank na die foto van my ma met 'n lang, blink rok aan. Haar koperkleurige hare is hoog op haar kop gestapel en die silwer kroon is bo-op. Sy was baie mooi voordat sy siek geword het.

Mamma blaai om sodat sy vir my nog foto's kan wys – 'n glimlaggende man met 'n kuil en kierie, 'n snaakse man met 'n groot houtpop op sy skoot. “Ek het altyd in die Vaudeville gesing,” sê sy. “Dit is hoe ek jou pa ontmoet het.”

Ek knik asof ek verstaan, maar ek verstaan niks nie. Sy blaas die rook uit en soek dan deur die stapel programme totdat sy een kry met 'n groep mans op wat snaakse klere aanhet.

“Hierdie een is Henri, jou pappa. Aantreklike Henri Gerard.”

Ek trek my oë op skrefies om beter te kan sien, maar die foto is so klein dat ek skaars sy gesig kan uitmaak. Mamma vat nog 'n sluk van haar medisyne en staan dan vir 'n lang ruk voor haar uit, haar oë leeg en donker, haar lippe baie bleek. Daar is geen lewe in haar gesig nie en dit maak my bang. Dit lyk of sy partykeer nie eens onthou wie ek is nie.

Ek raak aan haar hand. “Mamma?” Haar vingers voel net so koud soos die staalverwarmer wanneer dit af is.

Sy kyk uiteindelik na my, dan na die programme voor haar. Dit lyk of sy sopas wakker geword het en geen idee het waar sy is of hoe sy hier gekom het nie.

“Mamma?” sê ek weer en trek aan haar mou.

“Mmm?”

“Is dit die plek waarheen ons vandag gaan?” Ek wys na een van die pamflette.

“Nee, skattebol. Ons gaan sirkus toe.” Sy kry skielik weer lewe, onthou, en sorteer deur al die programme totdat sy uiteindelik die een kry waarna sy soek. Dit het 'n mooi ontwerp al om die rand en rooi letters wat al tot pienk verdof het. Mamma wys na die skets voorop. “Sien jy dit? Dit is 'n olifant, skattebol. Ek weet jy het nog nooit 'n olifant gesien nie, maar hulle is die grootste goed. Sien jy hoe klein die vrou langsaan lyk?”

Die olifant se kop lyk soos 'n slang. Ek voel bang. “Sal hy my eet?”

“Nee, glad nie, skattebol. Hy sal jou laat lag. En sien jy hierdie narre? Hulle sal jou ook laat lag. Jy sal mans sien wat hoog in die lug soos ape met klein swaai swaai en ... Ek weet sommer jy gaan dit baie geniet.” Sy vat nog twee slukke van haar medisyne, maak die glas leeg. Toe sy dit neersit en haar sigaret dooddruk, gaan sit ek styf teen haar. Mamma trek my nader en hou my

stywer vas as wat ek haar my nog ooit voel vashou het, asof iets vreesliks met ons albei gaan gebeur indien sy my laat gaan.

“Jy weet tog ek is lief vir jou, nè, skattebol?” fluister sy. “Jy weet ek wil ’n beter mamma wees, maar ... Jy verstaan mos dat ek ... nie gesond is nie?”

“Ja, Mamma.” Die waarheid is sy is soms so swak en bewering dat sy skaars tot by die winkel op die hoek kan loop om kos of nog medisyne te gaan koop. Die vorige week het sy op die trappe geval toe sy op pad terug was na ons kamer toe en die vrou wat die losieshuis bestuur, het lank op haar geskree. Sy het gesê as dit nie vir my was nie, sou sy Mamma lankal uitgegooi het op straat waar sy hoort. Ek het baie hard probeer om Mamma weer tot op haar voete te kry, maar ek kon dit nie alleen doen nie. Uiteindelik het een van die ander loseerders, ’n vriend van Mamma, daar aangekom en haar tot in ons kamer gehelp. Ek hou nie van die man nie. Hy het baie donker, deurmekaar hare en praat met Mamma in ’n vreemde taal. Hy ruik ook na vis. Tog het hy haar daardie dag tot in haar bed gehelp en sy het vir ’n baie lang ruk geslaap.

Ja, ek weet my mamma is baie siek. Die medisyne maak haar vir ’n klein rukkie beter, sterker. Sy sal lag en partykeer sing ook, net soos ’n engel, maar wanneer die bottel ambergeel vloeistof leeg is, sal Mamma slaperig en swak wees, skaars in staat om te praat.

“Jy weet tog ek is lief vir jou, nè, skattebol?” fluister sy weer. “As ek nie so lief was vir jou nie, sou ek jou nie vanmiddag na die sirkus toe gevat het nie, of hoe?”

Ons albei trek ons Sondagsklere aan en Mamma sit die klein kroontjie op my kop. Sy steek dit met haarnaalde in my goue krulle vas sodat dit nie sal afval nie. Ek voel soos ’n prinses. Mamma drink een laaste dosis medisyne vir krag. Dan gooi sy die res daarvan in ’n klein silwerflessie wat sy in haar handsak sit. Ons loop hand aan hand na die hoek waar die trem stop en ry dan ’n ver ent daarmee. Toe ons uiteindelik afklim, loop ons nog ’n ent totdat ek voor ons ’n groot gestreepte tent sien en die klank van die stoomorrel en die opgewonde geruis van stemme hoor.

Die volgende paar uur is die bestes wat ek nog ooit saam met my mamma deurgebring het. Ek het haar nog baie min so gelukkig en vol lewe gesien. Sy lag en wys na al die vreemde goed in die hoofvertoning, maar ook in die tente waar die byvertonings is. Toe sy sien hoe die spookasem my fassineer, gee sy vir my geld om daarvan te koop. Dit is taai en soet op my lippe, maar net wanneer ek verwag om die spookasem in my mond te voel, verdwyn dit. Ek huil en dink ek het dalk iets verkeerd gedoen.

“Waarheen het dit gegaan, Mamma?”

“O, skattebol, ek is so jammer. Ek moes jou gewaarsku het. Dit is

veronderstel om in jou mond te smelt. Dit is wat spookasem doen.” Sy kniel voor my en vee my trane met haar sakdoek af. Haar glimlag verdwyn en vir ’n oomblik kom lê daardie angswekkende, veraf kyk weer in haar oë. “Wanneer jy ’n bietjie ouer is, sal jy besef dit is hoe liefde ook is – net soos spookasem. Jou mond sal water daarvoor en dit sal soveel dinge belowe, maar wanneer jy jou deel daarvan probeer vat, sal daar niks wees nie. Net ’n soet, talmende smaak – as jy een van die gelukkiges is.”

Ek onthou dat die sirkus my daardie dag vol verwondering gelaat het, maar ek kan nie nou meer die wonderbaarlikheid daarvan onthou nie. In later jare het ek die werklikheid agter die front leer ken – die narre se geverfde glimlagte, die opwinding wat later nie meer so opwindend was as jy eers weet hoe alles gedoen word nie – en daarná was alles omtrent die sirkus vir my vals en goedkoop. Ek het selfs ontdek die mensvreter-tier waarvoor ek die eerste dag so groot geskrik het, is net so skadeloos soos Queen Esther en Arabella.

Wat ek wel van daardie eerste besoek aan die sirkus onthou, is dat daar soveel dinge op een slag aan die gang was dat ek nie geweet het waarna om eerste te kyk nie. Ek wou niks mis nie; daarom het ek aanhou vra: “Waarna kyk Mamma nou? Na watter een kyk Mamma?”

Ek onthou die musiek en die volgehoue opwinding en my ma se pragtige lag. Ek onthou hoe sy na haar asem gesnak het toe dit lyk of een van die sweefstokartieste gaan val, en hoe ons albei ons oë toegemaak en toe deur ons vingers geloer het, net om te ontdek dat hy toe nie geval het nie. Wat ek egter die duidelikste in my gedagtes onthou, is die onheilspellende manier waarop my ma met haar hartseer, grys oë na my gekyk het. Hoe sy met haar yskoue hande aan my hare of wang geraak en gesê het: “Jy weet tog dat ek jou liefhet, nè, skattebol?”

Toe die vertoning verby is, bly ons op die pawiljoen sit en luister hoe die orkes speel totdat die tent byna leeg is. Mamma se flessie medisyne is ook leeg. Ek het gesien hoe sy die klein silwerfles hoog oplig sodat sy die laaste druppel kan uitkry. Dan haal sy haar klein spieëltjie en lipstiffie uit haar handsak en maak haar lippe bloedrooi voordat sy dit met ’n blokkie toiletpapier droog druk.

“Hier is ’n soentjie wat jy kan hou, skattebol.” Ek druk die dun vel papier in my sak en ek het daardie afdruk van haar lippe vir ’n baie lang ruk gehou, totdat dit uiteindelik uitmekaargeval het.

Die oomblik toe die musiek ophou, stroom die werkers by die tent in en maak ’n groot lawaai terwyl hulle die pawiljoen en sirkusarenas begin afslaan. Mamma staan op en vat my hand.

“Eliza Rose Gerard, dit is tyd vir jou om jou pappa te ontmoet.”

Ons loop deur die leë tent en toe ons buite kom, is ek verbaas om te sien dat alles reeds afgeslaan is. Die tente van die byvertonings, die spookasemstalletjie, die tent waar die diere was en selfs die kaartjiekantoor het verdwyn sodat daar net 'n kaal, vertrapte stuk veld is waar al die betowering net 'n kort rukkies tevore was. Mamma lei my om na die agterkant van die groot sirkustent na 'n kleiner tent waar 'n groep sirkusmense lag en gesels terwyl hulle hul kostuums verruil vir gewone klere.

Dan wys Mamma na die man wat my pappa is.

Hy het helderrooi hare wat in alle rigtings staan en 'n groot rooi neus wat daarby pas. Hy het 'n groot, los broek van geruite materiaal aan saam met polkakol-kruisbande en 'n paar skoene wat heeltemal te groot vir hom lyk. Hy is 'n nar. 'n Verspotte grapmaker by die Bennett Brothers-sirkus.

My pa sit op 'n stoel voor 'n spieël en gesels sag met 'n ander man terwyl hy die wit grimering en oordrewe glimlag van sy gesig afvee. Hy stop egter – vries is eintlik die regte woord – toe hy opkyk en my ma sien.

“Hallo, Henri,” sê sy. Mamma is die enigste mens wat ek ooit Pappa se naam op die Franse manier hoor uitspreek het. Al die ander mense het hom Henry genoem.

“Yvette?” Hy klink stomgeslaan en glad nie seker of dit regtig sy is nie. Ek onthou hoeveel anders Mamma gelyk het toe hulle haar die Singende Engel genoem het, voordat sy siek geword en bottels en bottels medisyne nodig gehad het. Geen wonder Pappa kan haar nie herken nie, aangesien sy nou so maer is.

Mamma druk aan haar hare, asof sy dit kan regdruk en dit so weer mooi kan maak; asof sy wens dit was nog hoog op haar kop gestapel soos in die foto wat sy vir my gewys het. “Herken jy dan nie jou eie vrou nie, Henri?” vra sy en lag sag. “Of jou babadogter?”

Pappa kyk na die ander man, dan weer na Mamma voordat hy wegkyk. Sy wange word byna net so rooi soos sy hare. Die ander man druk vinnig sy kostuum in 'n trommel en verdwyn asof in 'n kulkunstenaar se toertjie. Pappa sukkel om sy neus en pruik af te haal en vee dan die laaste bietjie van sy grimering met 'n handdoek af voordat hy uiteindelik na my kyk. Hy probeer glimlag.

“Sy ... Sy het grootgeword vandat ek haar laas gesien het.”

“Ek sou so dink. Jy was langer as twee jaar weg, Henri. Sy word vyf met haar volgende verjaardag, nè, skattebol?”

Ek antwoord nie. Ek staar net na hierdie vreemdeling wat my pa is. Noudat hy sy grimering afgehaal het, dink ek hy is die aantreklikste man wat ek nog ooit gesien het; so anders as al die ander mans wat na ons losieshuiskamer toe

kom om vir Mamma te kom kuier en haar medisyne te bring. Hy het blink swart hare wat hy glad na agter kam en sy skouers lyk baie breed, sy bors gespierd onder sy vreemde uitrusting. Hy sit nog steeds waar hy was toe ons nadergekom het.

“Wat wil jy hê, Yvette?” vra hy. “Het jy dan nie die geld gekry wat ek gestuur het nie?” Hy lyk bang vir ons en ek kan nie verstaan waarom nie.

“Kan ons iewers heen gaan om te gesels, Henri? Ek kan doen met ’n sigaret.”

Pappa staan op en trek sy kostuum en snaakse skoene uit. Dan druk hy alles in een van die groot trommels waarin al die kostuums is. Hy het ’n onderhemp en gewone broek onder dit aan. Hy sê nie ’n enkele woord nie, maar trek sy baadjie en gewone skoene aan en lei ons dan oor die platgetrapte gras na ’n lang ry waens wat op ’n sypoor aan die verste ent van die stuk veld staan. Dit is al donker en lank ná my slaaptyd. Ek onthou nie regtig wat daarna gebeur het nie, want ek is so moeg ná al die opwinding van die sirkus dat ek my op Pappa se deurmekaar bed opkrul en aan die slaap raak terwyl Mamma en Pappa sigarette rook en gesels en ’n bottel van haar medisyne deel.

Die klein kompartement is donker toe ek wakker word. Ek weet nie waar ek is nie. Ek huil van die skrik en Mamma kom uit die donkerte nader en tel my in haar arms op. “Jy weet mos ek het jou liewer as enigiets anders in die hele wye wêreld, nè, skattebol?” fluister sy.

Ek knik en rus my kop op haar kaal skouer. Sy draai my in ’n kombers toe en lê my dan op die klein opgestopte bankie neer by die opvoutafel waar sy en Pappa vroeër gesit het. “Slaap nou maar, skattebol.” Toe sy my soen, ruik haar asem na haar medisyne. Ek raak weer aan die slaap.

Die geraas van die trein se fluit is die volgende ding wat my wakker maak. Ek sit regop en kyk in die maanverligte vertrek rond. In plaas van die losieshuis se bekende, gekraakte pleistermure sien ek die donker houtpanele van die trein se kompartement. ’n Oorvol asbakkie en ’n leë bottel van Mamma se medisyne staan op die tafel saam met twee vuil glase. My pappa se baadjie hang aan ’n haak agter die deur, maar die res van sy klere lê in ’n houpie op die vloer. Die treinwa ruk skielik en begin dan stadig beweeg.

Ek kyk rond of ek my ma sien, maar net my pa lê uitgestrek op die deurmekaar bed. Sy kop en een arm is al wat bo die lakens uitsteek. Die bottel en glase op die tafel begin klingel en ratel, en dan begin die hele vertrek van die een kant na die ander skud namate die trein al hoe vinniger beweeg.

“Mamma? Mamma, waar is Mamma?” roep ek. Wanneer ek alleen in ons kamer in die losieshuis wakker geword het, het Mamma altyd van iewers in

die gang af aangehardloop gekom wanneer ek haar roep. Hierdie keer kom sy nie. Die fluitjie blaas weer; 'n eensame, droewige geluid.

“Mamma!” huil ek.

My pappa kreun en sit stadig regop. Hy kyk deur die slaap om hom rond en staar dan ongelowig na my. “Wat de – ! Wat doen jy hier? Waar is Yvette? Yvette!”

Dit help egter nie dat enigeen van ons na haar roep nie. Daar is nêrens waar Mamma in hierdie klein hokkie kan wegkruip nie. Ek sien vrees in Pappa se oë, net soos die vorige aand. Hy probeer uit die bed klim, draai die laken om homself, maar die trein se beweging – wat nou al volspoed ry – maak hom onvas op sy voete. Hy val weer terug op die bed.

“O, God ... ” kreun hy. “Yvette, hoe kon jy?”

“Waar is my mamma?” huil ek.

Pappa vryf hard met sy hande oor sy gesig en lig dan stadig sy kop. “Sy het ons verlaat. Sy is weg.”

Ek was in daardie stadium te jonk om die dood te verstaan, maar 'n jaar of so later toe Carlo van die hoë kabel afval en sterf, en ek hoor hoe sy vrou, Bianca, kreun en huil: “Hy is weg ... hy is weg ... Hoe kon hy my verlaat?” en net soos my pappa op daardie eerste oggend uitroep na God, verstaan ek uiteindelik dat my mamma dood is aan haar vreeslike siekte. Sy het verdwyn om nooit weer gesien te word nie, net soos Carlo. Die sirkustrein beweeg aan na die volgende dorp en laat geen teken van enigeen van hulle agter nie.

Nog later, toe ek in 'n Lutherse Kerk in Lima, Ohio, alles omtrent die hemel leer, weet ek dat Jesus my mamma styf in sy arms vashou. Ek voel verlig omdat sy nooit weer siek sal wees of sal sukkel om regop te loop nie. Maar op daardie eerste oggend toe my pappa met sy gesig in sy hande sit en oor haar huil, kan ek niks anders doen nie as om saam met hom te huil en styf aan Mamma se silwertiera vas te hou, wat in die nag van my kop af geval het.

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Pappa weet glad nie wat om met my aan te vang nie. Vir die eerste drie dae kyk hy skaars na my, wat nog te sê my vashou of troos. “Hier ... eet dit,” sal hy sê en 'n bord kos met sy een vinger oor die tafel na my toe stoot. Hy vat dan sy eie bord en gaan sit op die treinwa se trap met sy rug na my toe en eet.

Ek slaap op die klein opgestopte bankie terwyl die trein deur die nag rammel en skud, en in die vroegoggendlik staan ek op dieselfde bankie op my knieë en kyk by die venster uit terwyl ons verby plase en woude en dorpe



snel. Ek bly vir drie dae in die treinwa, nog steeds met die klere aan wat Mamma vir my aangetrek het.

Wanneer die trein tot stilstand kom, sou ek kyk hoe die tentdorp op 'n oop stuk veld iewers op 'n boer se plaas verrys. “Bly hier,” sê Pappa elke oggend met sy kwaai stem wanneer hy uitgaan sirkus toe om sy kostuum aan te trek en grimering op te sit. Ek weet daar is waarskynlik tiere buite en ook olifante met koppe wat soos slange lyk, en ek is te bang om uit die treinwa uit te klim. Gelukkig kry tannie Peanut my uiteindelik jammer, anders weet ek nie wat van my sou geword het nie. Een oggend net toe Pappa op pad is om te gaan, stap sy verby en sien my voor die venster sit.

“Om hemelsnaam, Henry!” sê sy met haar skril stem. “Jy kan nie die kind vir die res van haar lewe daarbinne hou nie. Sy is 'n lewende mens. En boonop jou eie vlees en bloed!”

“Jy moet my help, Peanut,” smee Pappa. “Ek weet nie wat om met haar te doen, of wat sy nodig het nie.”

“Wel, bo alles moet sy so nou en dan 'n bietjie liefde kry, soos almal van ons.” Tannie Peanut kom in en klim langs my op die bankie. Dan trek sy my met haar kort armpies nader. Sy is nie baie groter as ek nie; 'n klein mensie met 'n vrou se lyf en lipstiffie en bos op haar gesig. So 'n koddige vreemdeling sou my bang gemaak het as ek nie so na my mamma verlang het nie. Vol verlange na vertroosting hou ek vir Peanut styf vas en huil.

“Sien jy, Henry?” sê sy. “Sien? Dit is al wat die kind nodig het. Net 'n bietjie liefde.”

“Haar ma is weg, Peanut, en ek weet nie wat om met haar te doen nie. Sal jy haar vat?”

“Haar vat? Sy is jou dogter!”

“Ek weet sy is my dogter,” sê Pappa kwaai, “maar daar is nie plek vir haar hierbinne nie, en ook nie in my lewe nie.”

“Daar is meer plek hier by jou as daar in my slaapwa. Wil jy haar inboender waar daar geen lig of lug is nie, en slaapbanke vol vroue wat tot teen die dak strek?”

“Ek wil haar glad nie hier hê nie,” sê hy en loop heen en weer in die klein ruimte. “'n Sirkus is nie die regte plek om 'n kind groot te maak nie.”

“Lazlo en Sylvia het kinders, en – ”

“Dit is nie wat ek bedoel nie. Ek weet daar is kinders hier, maar hulle sal grootword en deel van die sirkus wees. Hulle sal met ander sirkusmense trou. Ek wil nie hê sy moet dieselfde lewe lei as ek of haar ma nie. Ek wil vir haar 'n regte lewe hê, nie een wat sy tien maande 'n jaar op die pad moet deurbring terwyl sy uit 'n reistrommel uit leef nie.”

Tannie Peanut streel oor my hare. “Daardie tipe lewe gaan nie uit die lug uit val nie, Henry. Jy moet dit vir haar gee.”

“Ek kan nie. Dít is wat ek doen. Ek is ’n sirkusnar, nie ’n winkelier of ’n klerk in die bank nie. Ek was nooit van plan om ’n pa te word nie. Dit het per ongeluk gebeur ... so toe trou ek met Yvette en nou is sy weg en –”

“En jy is ’n pa,” sê sy bitsig. “Tensy jy van plan is om jou kind iewers by ’n weeshuis af te laai, moet jy vir haar ’n pa wees, Henry.”

“Ek weet nie hoe nie!” skree hy. Die geluid laat my kriewel. Dit was een van slegs ’n halfdosyn keer in my lewe dat ek my pa hoor skree het. Tannie Peanut laat my gaan en spring van die bankie af sodat sy na hom toe kan gaan. Sy sit haar hand op sy arm om hom te kalmeer.

“Het jy dan nie ’n pa gehad nie?” vra sy sag.

“Hy is dood toe ek agt was.” Pappa gryp sy hardebolkeil van die tafel af en sit dit op sy kop. “Ek het nie tyd hiervoor nie, Peanut. Ek gaan laat wees vir die optog, en ek het nog nie eens my kostuum aan nie.” Hy pluk die deur oop.

“Wees net die pa wat jy nog altyd gewens jy kon gehad het, Henry.”

Pappa steek in die deur vas, draai dan stadig om en staar na haar. Dit lyk of sy hom geklap het. “Wat het jy gesê?”

“Dit is al wat dit verg. As jy wens jou pa het jou in die aande in die bed gesit, sit haar dan in die bed. As jy wens jou pa het jou op sy skoot laat sit en vir jou stories vertel, vertel dan vir haar stories.”

Hy haal sy hoed af, kam ’n paar keer met sy vingers deur sy blink hare en sit die hoed dan weer op sy kop. Dit lyk of hy nie weet wat om te sê nie.

“Leer haar onderskei tussen reg en verkeerd, Henry. Die Tien Gebooie, die Goue Reël. Jy hét tog al daarvan gehoor, nè?”

“Ja ... my ma was ’n goeie Christenvrou.” Hy praat so sag dat ek hom skaars kan hoor. “Sy het ons volgens die Goeie Boek grootgemaak. Dit is hoekom ek met Yvette getroud is nadat ... toe ek gehoor het sy verwag.”

“Dan sal jy goed vaar,” sê tannie Peanut en tik hom op die arm. “Gaan nou, voordat jy jou wa mis. Ek kan seker maar die optog hierdie keer misloop. Ek sal die kind vandag saam met my vat.”

“Nee! Nie na die fratsskou –”

“Hoekom nie?” Sy is skielik kwaad. “As die sirkus haar huis gaan wees, moet sy leer dat fratse soos ek ook mense is. Of is jy skaam dat sy jou ‘familie’ moet leer ken, Henry?”

“Ek is jammer ... Ek het nie bedoel –”

“Maak dat jy wegkom voordat ek my humeur verloor.”

Sy wys met haar kort, dik vinger na die deur. Pappa loop. Tannie Peanut is nou regtig ’n klein botteltjie vol groot gif. Sy het egter ook ’n hart wat twee

keer groter is as die meeste ander mense s'n. Sy vat my hand.

“Wat is jou naam, liefie?”

“Eliza Rose.”

“Mmm. Jou naam is net so mooi soos jy. Kom, ek sal jou in jou nuwe tuisdorp rondwys.”

Ek sien gou dat dit regtig soos 'n dorp is; 'n onafhanklike tentdorp wat wonderbaarlik in die nag van die een plek na die volgende verskuif. Daar is die kookhuis waar die kokke al ons etes maak; twee eettente, een vir die kunstenaars en die ander een vir die werkers; 'n tent vir die kostuums; 'n haarkapper en wassery; tente vir die olifante en ander diere; en 'n groot, lang tent met die mans en vroue se kleedkamers aan weerskante en in die middel stalle vir die perde wat deel is van die vertonings.

Dit is die privaat areas van ons tentdorp, maar daar is ook openbare areas – die tente wat deel is van die vertoning, soos die groot sirkustent en 'n ander kleiner tent. Die markiestent vorm die hoofingang na die sirkustent en die menagerie waar mense met kaartjies na al die eksotiese diere kan kyk. In die kleiner tent is die byvertonings se tente aan die linkerkant en aan die regterkant is die stalletjies wat verversings verkoop asook die waens waar 'n mens kaartjies kry.

“Ek werk meestal hier by die kleiner vertonings,” verduidelik tannie Peanut daardie eerste dag. Sy wys na die banier wat die gebeure binne-in die tent adverteer, en die groot prent van tannie Peanut lyk baie langer as wat sy is. “Ek is Queen Lily,” sê sy met 'n droë laggie, “die wêreld se kleinste vrou en koningin van die lilliputters. Dan trek ek my narkostuum aan vir een van die items saam met jou pa waar ek ‘Peanut’ genoem word, maar dit is eers later in die vertoning.”

Sy tel my op 'n klein verhogie naby die tent se ingang. “Jy staan nou op die reklameverhoog,” sê sy. “Hulle laat altyd een of twee van ons fratse hierbuite staan sodat die mense verniet kan kyk. Dit maak gewoonlik dat hulle geld spandeer om by die tent in te kom.”

Tannie Peanut tel my met 'n kreun van die verhogie af en vat my hand, maar toe ek sien waarheen sy my wil lei, steek ek vas. Mamma het my 'n paar dae tevore by dié tent ingevat en ek was so bang dat ek my kop teen haar skouer gedruk en geweier het om te kyk.

“Wat makeer, liefie? Is jy bang?” vra tannie Peanut. “Jy hoef nie te wees nie. Die afskuwelike sneeumens is eintlik 'n dooie opgestopte beer uit Alaska wat al so oud en muwwerig is dat ons gedurig die pels moet vasplak.” Sy vat albei my hande in hare en trek my teen my sin na binne terwyl sy die hele tyd met haar skril stem praat. “Die tweekop-kalf was eens op 'n tyd lewend, maar

kyk net hier. Hy is ook dood en opgestop.”

“Is die slang regtig?” fluister ek en waag dit skaars om te kyk. ’n Groot luislang lê opgerol in ’n glaskas op die verhoog langs die kalf, myle en myle van die skubberige gedierte, so groot in omtrek soos ’n man se arm.

“Ja, maar hy sal jou nie seermaak nie. Sylvia gee hom so baie kos dat hy omtrent die hele tyd slaap. Vir die vertoning drapeer sy hom om haar lyf en die ding beweeg net so stadig soos die Mississippi. Kom ons gaan agtertoe dan stel ek jou aan die ander voor.”

Ek is verlig om uit die tent weg te kom, maar die klein groepie mense wat agter die tent staan terwyl hulle gesels en sigarette rook, lyk net so skrikwekkend soos die diere daarbinne.

“Hei almal, dit is Henry Gerard se dogter,” sê tannie Peanut. “Haar naam is Eliza Rose en sy gaan vir ’n rukkie saam met ons reis.”

Almal glimlag en groet my met: “Welkom, Eliza,” en: “Bly om jou hier te hê, hartjie,” maar my hart klop van vrees en ek probeer agter tannie Peanut se romp wegkruip. Sylvia die slangvrou is van kop tot toon vol tatoeëermerke. Gloria die vet vrou is die heel grootste mens wat ek al ooit gesien het met bene so dik soos boomstompe en ’n rok wat vir ’n olifant sal pas. Een van die mans in die groep is so verskriklik lelik dat ek my gesig wegsteek. Hy het spierwit hare op sy pienk kopvel, en pienk uitpeuloë en sy vel is byna deurskynend. Die advertensie sê hy kom van ’n skaars groep mense wat onder die grond bly, afstammelinge van ’n agtergelate ruimteskip van Mars, maar ek sou later leer dat Albert eintlik ’n albino is. Die enigste mens in die hele groep wat normaal lyk, is die rubbervrou, alhoewel sy ook net normaal lyk wanneer sy staan. Sodra die vertoning begin, draai sy haar lyf in knope totdat sy soos ’n pretzel lyk.

Ek wil vreeslik graag terughardloop na die veiligheid van my pa se kompartement, maar ek ken nie die pad tussen die doolhof tente deur nie. My nuwe huis en nuwe familie is so vreemd en bisar dat hulle my oorweldig. Ek het dit nooit verder as ’n paar blokke van die losieshuis af saam met Mamma gewaag nie, en totdat sy begin nagmerries kry het, was my beperkte wêreld baie veilig. Nou voel dit of ek pens en pootjies binne-in een van Mamma se nagmerries is.

“Goeie aarde, jy bewee soos ’n riet,” sê tannie Peanut toe sy my vingers van haar romp probeer losmaak. “Jy kan seker nie hier by my bly nie. As ek op die verhoog moet gaan terwyl jy so aan my vasklou, sal hulle moet sê ons is ’n Siamese tweeling.”

Ek hoor hoe hulle almal sag van my praat en vir tannie Peanut uitvra oor my ma en probeer uitpluis wie na my kan kyk wanneer die vertoning begin.

Dit lyk nie of hulle kan besluit wat met my moet gebeur nie en hulle stry so lank daaroor dat ons almal sommer gou hoor hoe die optog terugkeer na die sirkusgronde toe.

“Ek moet jou seker maar terugvat na jou pa toe,” sê tannie Peanut uiteindelik.

Pappa sit bo-op ’n pragtige wa wat deur ’n span van vier Percheron-perde getrek word. Ek herken hom aan die rooi neus en pruik en die oorgroot paar skoene. Die oomblik toe die wa langs die kleedkamertent tot stilstand kom, klim hy en die ander narre af.

Dit lyk of Pappa skrik toe tannie Peanut reguit op hom afpyl met my op haar hakke, asof hy heeltemal van my vergeet het.

“Jy is reg, Henry. Al die mense en dinge in die byvertoning se tent maak haar bang. Sy moet liever by jou bly.”

Dit lyk of hy gaan weghardloop. Sy nar-gesig glimlag, maar sy regte gesig is stroef. “Luister, ek weet nie – ”

“Moet dit nie waag om haar weer in jou kompartement toe te sluit nie!”

Tannie Peanut tel my met ’n kreun op en gee my so skielik vir my pa aan dat hy nie ’n ander keuse het as om my in sy arms te vang nie. Peanut draai om.

“Nee, wag!” sê Pappa. “Wat is ek veronderstel om met haar te doen?”

“Hou haar vas, Henry,” roep sy oor haar skouer terwyl sy koddig wegstap. “Hou haar net vas.”

Aan die begin is my pa se arms so koud en styf soos die opgestopte beer uit Alaska, maar toe ek my gesig teen sy bors druk en oor my mamma huil, voel ek hoe sy lyf stadigaan ontspan.

“Ek weet ... ek weet ... ” mompel hy, en ek voel gou dat hy my nie net vashou nie, maar vasdruk terwyl hy my rug streel en my saggies sus sodat my trane kan ophou. Hy ruik na grimeersel en sigarette en die makassarolie wat hy gebruik om sy regte hare agteroor te kam.

“Alles gaan regkom,” belowe hy. “Moenie huil nie ... ”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**B**ut I did cry. For days and days. It's a wonder Daddy's clown suit didn't sprout mildew. I clung to his baggy trousers so tightly he had no choice but to take me with him wherever he went. He hid me by his feet on the floor of the clown wagon during the parade, then seated me in a special chair beside the bandstand during the afternoon and evening performances. I watched the Bennett Brothers Circus perform over and over again until I knew every act and musical selection by heart.

Eventually the memories of my mother began to fade and my life slipped into its new routine. Early every morning the train would come to a halt and I would wake up in a new town to the shouts and whistles of the razorbacks as they unloaded the flatcars in a vacant field. They unloaded the cookhouse and wardrobe wagons first so that the performers could eat breakfast and get dressed for the parade. I'd go down to clown alley with Daddy after breakfast and watch him put on his clown suit, wig, and makeup. He drew big white circles around his eyes and mouth, then outlined them in black. By the time he'd painted on his smiling red lips and attached his buffoon nose, he no longer looked like my handsome daddy.

Meanwhile, the roustabouts and canvasmen would set up the tent city. I later heard a sermon in an Episcopalian church in Milwaukee about how Ezekiel spoke and the dead bones came to life and rose up and lived, and I thought it must have looked just like the bones of those tents coming together—first the skeleton, then a covering of canvas skin, then they were filled with music and wonder and life.

The first event in every town was always the parade. This gave the townsfolk a taste of what the circus had to offer and lured them to buy tickets to the Big Top. In most of the places we visited, the circus was the only entertainment people had all year and the town would pretty much shut down as if it were a holiday when we arrived. Where else could farmers who were tied to their land and their animals year-round see lions and elephants and dancing bears and giant snakes?

The big Percheron horses that had labored to unload the rail cars were quickly decked out in fancy plumes and glittering harnesses to pull the circus wagons in the parade. The bandmaster split his band in two, and half the musicians rode in the lead bandwagon while the other half rode in one of the tableau wagons in the middle of the lineup. These tableau wagons were covered all over with fancy carvings, brightly colored paint, and gold leaf to depict various fairy tales. When I grew older, Aunt Peanut dressed me up as Cinderella and I rode on one of the wagons, holding a glass slipper in one hand and waving to the crowd with the other. I had a lot of fun until Daddy put a stop to it. He said the cheers might go to my head and give me a taste for show business, which was the last thing in the world he wanted for me.

The clowns marched in the middle of the parade, pulling pranks and making everybody laugh. Sometimes Daddy walked down the street on a towering pair of stilts that made him look ten feet tall. The lions and tigers rolled by in their cage wagons, pulled by more horses, but Gunther only uncovered one or two of the cages for a peek so folks would be sure to come to the circus to see more. The elephants paraded near the end because they were the attraction that everyone was dying to see. The Gambrini family, who trained our elephants, dressed their three children in sparkling costumes and perched them on the elephants' backs to wave to all the people.

Last of all came the steam calliope, rolling down the street with a

warble of organ pipes and the clash of drums, cymbals, xylophones, and bells. People would fall into step behind the calliope and follow us back to the circus grounds to see the show. They would have time to view Aunt Peanut's sideshow, to visit the menagerie tent, and to buy cotton candy and Cracker Jack before the afternoon performance began.

Daddy would take a short break to catch his breath after the parade and we would grab some lunch at the dining tent. But then the clowns would have to reassemble in the Big Top to entertain the children while the audience filed in for the shows. When the performance finally began, Daddy marched on his stilts again in the Grand Entry parade with the entire circus ensemble, then he came back four or five times throughout the show to perform his comic routines with the other clowns. It was their job to entertain the crowd while the workers cleaned up after the elephants and moved equipment in and out for the various acts. Daddy was also an expert stunt rider and he performed a clown routine with one of the show horses. He pretended that the horse had run wild with him hanging on for dear life, and he scared me half to death the first few times I saw him—riding backward, “falling” beneath the horse's belly, doing handstands on its back.

The circus performed two shows in most of the towns we visited, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. My daddy wouldn't get to sit down and take off his floppy shoes and makeup until the last audience had finally left the tent.

During the final performance, the roustabouts would take our tent city apart again and reload the train, saving the Big Top and pad room for last. They'd put everything on the train in the order we would need it in the next town, and as soon as they'd pulled the last tent stake everyone would board the train. We slept through the night as the locomotive hauled the five stock cars, ten flat cars, and four



coaches to the next town, then we woke up the next morning and repeated the whole cycle all over again. When I heard a Sunday school teacher describe how the people in the Bible moved from place to place with their tents and their livestock, I thought for sure that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had traveled with the circus.

I slept on the banquette seat in my daddy's tiny compartment. Single men like Daddy usually bunked in the sleeping car with the other bachelors, rather than in a private compartment—the circus usually reserved those for their star performers and family acts. But the Bennett brothers regarded Daddy very highly, putting him in charge of all the other clowns, and he'd convinced them he needed space to plan out all the clowns' routines and to come up with new gags and acts. When I grew too big to sleep on the banquette seat, one of the carpenters built a fold-down bunk above Daddy's bed for me to sleep on.

After the last show my daddy needed time to unwind, so he usually went down to the pie car for a while every night to talk and relax and play a game of cards with the other performers. But he always listened to me say my prayers first, then tucked the covers tightly around me and said, "May the Lord keep His angels 'round about you."

By the time my first season with the Bennett Brothers' Circus ended and we returned to our winter home in Macon, Georgia, I no longer clung to my daddy day and night. To be honest, I'd grown sick to death of watching the same show over and over twice a day, and I'd begged him to let me stay outside in the "backyard" behind the Big Top instead. The other performers cheerfully shuttled me from tent to tent while Daddy worked, and there was always a willing pair of arms to hold me. They might belong to a clown or to an acrobat or a bareback rider, but someone always watched out for me.

Eventually I felt at home everywhere, and everyone knew me and gave me little jobs to do. Gunther taught me how to water his lions

and tigers without being afraid. Mr. Gambrini always took me along with his own three kids when his elephants went down to the river to cool off. He taught me how to swim and to ride on the elephants' backs. Lazlo taught me how to juggle, starting with two balls and working my way up to four. He taught me how to skip rope, too, only Lazlo could do it on a slack wire while I had to stay on the ground. Charlie the clown taught me how to ride a bicycle. He had a chimpanzee named Zippy who rode the bike as part of his act and Charlie sometimes paid me to "monkey-sit." The hardest part of monkey-sitting was keeping Zippy from smoking. He'd gotten hooked by watching the other performers smoke, and he picked up the cigarettes they tossed aside when their turn came to enter the Big Top. That chimpanzee could even blow smoke rings!

"Don't let him get his hands on any butts, Eliza," Charlie would warn when he left me in charge. "He's starting to get a smoker's cough." But Zippy was fast as lightning, and if I didn't get to the stubs first and crush them out, Zippy would snatch them right up and start puffing up a storm and there was no way on earth you could get the butts away from him after that.

Daddy taught me how to read when I grew older, then sent me to "school" with the other circus children for three hours every day. There were never more than a dozen or so of us, with our parents taking turns as teachers. Everyone except me had a part in his parents' acts and had to perform in two shows a day, so our education was pretty hit-and-miss. Once Daddy enrolled me in a regular school during the months our circus spent in Georgia. I hated it! I was so different from all the other kids that it was impossible for me to fit in and be accepted. I cried and stomped and fussed until Daddy finally gave up the idea. I went back to taking lessons with the other circus kids, in between training sessions as their families practiced their new acts for the coming season.

I longed to be part of my daddy's act—or any other act, for that matter. The Gambrini children wore spangled costumes and got to ride on the elephants' backs, grinning and spreading their arms gracefully as they showed off their skills. One elephant would lift little Angela Gambrini right up in the air on his trunk while she waved to the cheering crowd. Another family act trained the dogs and ponies, and their two young sons had learned how to put the animals through all their paces before they'd even learned how to read. The horseback riders balanced their kids high on their shoulders as they stood on the horse's back and galloped around the ring for the finale.

But Daddy absolutely refused to let me be part of the circus. When he caught Gina teaching me how to shinny up the rope she performed on, he chewed her out something awful, then wouldn't speak to her for a whole month. I offered to ride in the elephant act when the Gambrini kids caught the chicken pox and couldn't perform, but Daddy said, "Absolutely not!" But he was angriest of all the time I talked Charlie the clown into painting my face to look just like my father's. Daddy was furious with both of us.

"You're fired, Charlie!" he bellowed, "And you! You're washing that stuff off right *now*!" He dragged me to the washhouse by the scruff of the neck. I'd never seen him so angry.

"Why won't you let me be a clown?" I sobbed as he scrubbed my face clean. It's a wonder he didn't take off all my skin, too.

"You're grounded for a week!" he replied.

"So what? I'm grounded all the time, anyway! I have nothing to do all day, Daddy. Everyone's part of the show but me. Where do I fit in?"

"You don't. You're not part of this circus, and as long as I have anything to say about it, you never will be part of it!"

"But why?"

He finally stopped his merciless scrubbing and tossed me a towel.

“Listen, I’m raising you here because I don’t have a choice. But someday I want you to make a better life for yourself, away from this place.”

I looked up at his scowling face and angry eyes, and I began to tremble. “You don’t want me, do you, Daddy?”

“Of course I want you, but—”

“No, you don’t. You’ve been wishing I’d go away ever since Mama died. She always told me how much she loved me, but you never do. You don’t love me at all! The only person you care about is yourself!”

My words stunned him. The anger in his eyes turned to pain. “Eliza, if I didn’t love you so much, I wouldn’t be willing to let you go.”

“That doesn’t even make sense!”

“Yes, it does. Listen...” He fumbled for words, raking his fingers through his jet black hair. “If...If all I cared about was myself, then I’d be trying to make you over into my image. I’d want you to carry on in my footsteps and build some kind of a clown dynasty for me. But that’s wrong. You’re not me, you’re your own unique person.” He crouched in front of me, gently taking my shoulders. “There’s a whole other world out there beyond the circus, Eliza. I don’t want you to be a clown like me. I want you to be what you were meant to be.”

“But...what was I meant to be, Daddy?”

He took the towel from my hands and carefully dried my tears with it. “I don’t know, Eliza. That’s something you’ll have to find out for yourself.”

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I thought about my Daddy’s words a lot after that, but I clearly recall the day everything changed forever for me, the day I no longer wanted to work in the circus. I was twelve years old and helping out in the concession booth outside the marquee when a young family came up to purchase some cotton candy. The mother had on a pretty

blue-and-white dress and the father had on his Sunday shirt and trousers. He called her “dear” in a quiet, loving way as they bought cotton candy for their two children, a boy and a girl. The mother crouched beside the children and patiently helped them get the hang of eating it, smiling and laughing with them. But the father wasn’t watching his children. Instead, he watched his wife’s face, and the tenderness I saw in his eyes transformed his plain, rugged features.

When they went inside the menagerie tent, I left my post at the cotton candy booth to follow them. The father bought a bag of peanuts so his son could feed the elephants, but the boy was afraid to so the father lifted him up in his arms. The mother held the little girl’s hand tightly as they looked at the tigers.

I had to hurry back to my booth, but when the show started I went inside the Big Top and searched the bleachers for that family. I didn’t find them. Instead, I saw hundreds of families just like them—mothers and fathers and grandparents and children, all laughing and enjoying the circus together. The pain I felt was so excruciating I might as well have fallen from the high wire. It knocked the wind right out of me. For the first time in my life I knew I was missing something—a family—and I ached for one with all my heart.

When the show ended I stood by the main exit as the people streamed out, and I finally saw the little family again. The father carried his sleepy daughter in his arms while the mother held the little boy’s hand. They would go home to the house they shared together, with a cozy kitchen, quilt-covered beds, and a warm stove in the parlor. They would wake up tomorrow and every morning in the same house, in the same small town where everyone knew their names.

I wandered out to my “backyard.” The roustabouts had the city of tents almost completely dismantled and loaded onto the rail cars already. I saw Daddy in his goofy clown suit and floppy shoes and Aunt Peanut who was tiny enough for me to carry in my arms, and I

hated them. For the first time in my life I longed for a real family, not the strange collection of circus people I'd grown up with.

That longing never went away. As the circus train traveled through the night, I would see warm lights glowing inside the homes we passed and I would grieve because I didn't live in one of those houses. The wail of the train whistle was a lonely sound that never failed to bring tears to my eyes. It meant moving on to another town, another state, where I'd be just a stranger passing through. Worse, I was part of a rowdy band of circus freaks, looked upon with suspicion and distrust wherever we went. The community locked all its doors whenever the circus came to town.

Day after day I watched the families who brought their children to the shows and I envied them—mothers and little girls in pretty dresses, fathers who bought Cracker Jack and cotton candy for their sons. And every chance I got, I begged my father to leave the circus so we could be a real family, too, and live in a real house instead of a train compartment.

But Daddy always sighed and said, "This is my job, Eliza. This is what I love to do." And the razorbacks would set the ramps in place behind the flatcars, and the colorful wagons would roll onto the train again, and the circus would move to the next town. And I would move with it.

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Daddy wouldn't let me learn any circus tricks, but he did make sure that I learned some of the skills I would need in the outside world. I learned how to cook from the chefs at the cookhouse, and it's a good thing my husband had a big appetite because I'd learned to make everything in huge proportions. I learned how to sew from the wardrobe ladies, and when I became a teenager, Gina and Luisa taught me to use makeup and fix my hair. Charlie and the other

clowns taught me to laugh at myself and at life. I'd handled a chimpanzee and elephants and even a trained bear, so I was never afraid of pigs and cows and chickens.

The sideshow people who once scared me so badly taught me not to look down on people who were different. "It's the heart that matters," Aunt Peanut taught me, "not what people look like on the outside. Some of the handsomest people in the world have hearts that stink worse than elephant manure."

I learned what it meant to stay flexible and roll with the punches as the circus weathered all sorts of crises—band members who suddenly quit between shows, roustabouts who got drunk and missed the train, horses with broken legs, and windstorms that blew rain into the wardrobe tent, soaking all the costumes. Even seasoned performers sometimes fell and injured themselves, or a catch might go wrong in the trapeze act and result in broken teeth and bruised jaws. When our star bareback rider broke her ankle, her brother put on a wig and dressed in drag to ride in her place. We coped with mud-mired fields and weeks of rain-canceled performances and paychecks that arrived late. We never had a train wreck, but we'd heard horror stories of other circuses that had, so the fear was always there.

My religious training was a patchwork quilt of beliefs, pieced together from a variety of denominations and sermons in churches scattered across America. We usually had Sunday off, and Daddy always made sure I went to church if he could find one nearby. I remember sitting on his lap in a rear pew when I was little, listening to the beautiful music and gentle prayers and wondering about this heavenly Father everyone always talked about. Surely He didn't wear a clown wig and floppy shoes. And the ministers all said He lived in a house with many rooms in a place called heaven, not in a train compartment.

One Sunday I came out of an Orthodox church after hearing a

sermon about Adam and Eve, and I was madder than a hornet. I confronted my daddy with what I'd learned as he walked me back to the circus grounds.

"You're always telling me I have to do what the Good Book says, Daddy, but you don't do it! The Bible says it's not good for a man to live alone. That's why God made a helpmeet for Adam." I stomped my feet on the sidewalk for emphasis as I walked. The fact that I was all riled up seemed to amuse Daddy.

"I don't live alone," he chuckled, "I live with you—not to mention three or four dozen other performers."

"That's not what the Bible means and you know it! You need a wife, Daddy."

His smile faded. "I had a wife—your mother—and that didn't work out so good."

"Well, Mama is dead, and I think it's high time you got married again. I need a mother and you need a helpmeet. Why can't you marry Aunt Peanut—for real, this time?"

Daddy and Aunt Peanut got "married" during every performance. He walked around on stilts, and because he was so tall and she was so tiny it was impossible for him to kiss his new "bride." After Daddy would try three or four hilarious schemes that didn't work, the acrobats would finally come out and help the newlyweds by standing on each other's shoulders and lifting Peanut higher and higher until she and Daddy finally kissed and the audience cheered.

"You're joking, right?" Daddy asked. "You want me to marry *Peanut*?"

"Don't laugh! I love Aunt Peanut...and she loves you." He glanced at me with a worried look. "It's true, Daddy. She's always been crazy about you. If you weren't so busy flirting with Gina and Luisa and all the other pretty girls, you'd see how much she loves you."

"Well, I'm sorry," he sighed, "but I just don't feel the same way



about her. She's a good friend, that's all. And besides, my love life is really no concern of yours."

We'd reached an intersection and I was so worked up I stepped out in the busy street without looking, right into the path of a rushing streetcar. Daddy stuck his arm out just in time and pulled me back.

"Hey! Watch out, Eliza!" The close call shook him. He crouched in front of me, gripping my shoulders. "Are you okay?" We were eye-to-eye and my usually cocky father looked pale.

"I'm fine." The near-miss barely fazed me. I wanted answers. "How come you didn't live with Mama when I was little?" I blurted out.

He stood again, shaking his head. We then continued walking, and I didn't think he would answer me, so it surprised me when he did.

"That marriage was a disaster right from the start," he said. "We met on the Vaudeville circuit, where your mother was the star singer, and Charlie and I did a comedy routine. Yvette claimed she loved me, but she always hated what I did, hated that I covered up my face with greasepaint and wore stupid clothes. She kept trying to change me, you know? Make me look for a different line of work. Then when she took to the bottle so bad, I kept trying to change her. That never works. You either accept each other the way you are or it's over. For us, it was over. I got a job with the Bennett Brothers and went on the road. She stayed in New Orleans with you. She said she didn't want to travel anymore."

As we approached another intersection Daddy reached for my hand. I guess the close call with the streetcar had scared him because it was one of the very few times that he ever did that.

"I'm telling you all this," he continued, "because I don't want you to mess up like your mother and I did. The Good Book is right—people shouldn't live alone. But you need to marry someone who's going to work together with you, Eliza, like a team, not someone who tries to change you. Watch how the Flying Falangas work together in

their trapeze act sometime. They trust each other. They put their lives in each other's hands every day. And they're always there to catch the other person before they fall. That's what a husband and wife should have—teamwork and trust.”

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When I became a teenager Aunt Peanut decided I needed the company of other women to help guide me, so I moved out of Daddy's train compartment and into the women's sleeping car. The old Pullman car had been retired from passenger service and converted for use by the circus. There was nothing beautiful about those living quarters at all. The car was cramped and hot, with a narrow aisle down the center and bunks stacked two high and two across. Each berth had a pair of liver-colored curtains on rings that you could close for “privacy,” but they didn't block out everyone's snores and giggles and tears. Or their secrets. I knew who was feuding, who was in love, and who was thinking of “blowing the show.”

I felt all grown-up living on my own, and like the other women I bunked with, I began to take an interest in the opposite sex. I kissed a boy, one of the stable grooms, for the very first time one night when he walked me home to the women's sleeping car after the evening performance. I didn't think my daddy knew what I was up to any more now that I no longer lived with him, but I learned how wrong I was that night! We barely had time to duck behind the rail car for one little smooch before Daddy came charging around the corner with fire in his eyes. The poor boy took off running and I don't think he slowed down until he crossed the state line.

Meanwhile, my father dragged me off to his train compartment, corralling poor Aunt Peanut along the way. He was furious and I was scared. I had no idea what I had done wrong. I sat huddled beside Peanut on the banquette seat while Daddy paced the tiny room like

one of Gunther's lions. He roared like one, too.

"What in blazes did you think you were doing? Guys like him are after only one thing, Eliza!"

He glared at me as if I should know exactly what that one thing was, but I was terribly naïve—and quite mystified. "What, Daddy? I don't have anything."

I was even more mystified when Daddy began to blush. "Tell her, Peanut," he mumbled.

"Oh no, you don't! That's your job, Henry." She hopped off the banquette and headed for the door as fast as her tiny legs could go.

Daddy blocked her path. "Well, I'm asking you to help me."

"No way! I'm out of here!" Her voice squeaked even higher than usual.

They went back and forth like this until I felt ready to scream. "Tell me *what!*" I yelled, pounding my fist on the table.

Aunt Peanut finally relented. She booted Daddy out of the car and told me the facts of life. She finished her explanation by saying, "You see? Most boys won't bother to buy the cow if they're already getting the milk for free. Wait for a wedding ring, honey. Wait for Mr. Right."

I was disgusted with boys, my daddy, Aunt Peanut, and the world in general for several weeks.

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Not long after my eighteenth birthday the circus played in New Orleans. I'd found out from Charlie that he and Daddy had grown up in New Orleans and that I used to live there with my mother. The last performance of a two-day run was about to start when Charlie came racing up to me at the concession booth where I worked. He was all out of breath.

"Where's your father, Eliza? Have you seen him?"

"No, not since lunchtime. Why?"

“The show’s about to start! He already missed the preshow, and he’s supposed to be lining up for the grand-entry parade right now!”

I couldn’t believe it. “Daddy’s...missing?”

“Yes! I’ve searched everywhere and I can’t find him!”

I was suddenly very frightened. It wasn’t like my daddy to be late for a show, much less miss one altogether. “I’ll help you look for him,” I said. I turned off the cotton candy machine, handed the cash box to the ticket-booth cashier, and took off at a run for the back lot, praying that something awful hadn’t happened to him.

He wasn’t in clown alley. He wasn’t in the pad room either, and the horse he always rode in his stunt act was still tethered inside. The rail cars had been parked clear across the field from the Big Top, but I sprinted all the way over there when I ran out of other places to look. I bounded up to Daddy’s compartment and flung open the door without even knocking, then stopped dead in my tracks in shock.

Daddy was there all right, sitting at the little table. And right beside him sat my mama. She wasn’t dead at all! She looked just as thin and ill as she had the day she left me, thirteen years ago, but she was very much alive!

“Eliza? Sugar, is that you?” Mama asked. “Why, you’re a beautiful young lady, Sugarbaby! Isn’t she beautiful, Henri?”

Even if I hadn’t recognized Mama’s face I would have known her by that velvety drawl—and by the bottle of amber “medicine” on the table in front of her. I was almost too stunned to speak.

“Mama? You...you’re *alive*?”

“Well, I think so, Sugar,” she said with a little laugh. “At least I was the last time I looked.”

I couldn’t take it all in! If Mama was alive, then why had she gone away and left me here with Daddy? And why had my daddy lied to me all these years, making me think my mama was dead if she wasn’t? I looked from one of them to the other, and the anger and betrayal

grew inside me until my rage finally exploded.

“You lied to me, Daddy!”

“I didn’t lie. I never said—”

“Yes, you did! You knew I thought Mama was dead, and you just kept on letting me think it was true!”

“Eliza, let me explain....”

“No! Why should I believe a word you say? All this time you and Mama could have lived together and made a home for me so I would have a mother and a father like everyone else, but you were both too selfish!”

“That’s not true—”

“You never wanted me! Neither one of you! Mama abandoned me on the doorstep because she didn’t want me—”

“No, sugar, I loved you so much that—”

“And you didn’t want me either, Daddy! You’ve been trying to get rid of me all these years, telling me to leave the circus and go out on my own. Well, you’ll both get your wish! You’ll never see me again!” I turned to run out the door and bumped smack into Charlie.

“There you are, Henry!” he cried. “What in blazes are you still doing here? Come on!”

Daddy bolted to his feet. “Holy smokes! What time is it?”

“You already missed the grand entry and it’s almost time for your bareback routine. And look at you! Where’s your face?”

Daddy’s face was bare. His wig and red nose lay on his bunk beside the stained towel he’d used to wipe off all his greasepaint. He looked from Charlie to me, then to Mama, and I could see he felt torn.

“Fill in for me, Charlie,” he begged. “I’m in the middle of something —”

“Are you crazy? I can’t do that bareback routine, none of us can. We’ll kill ourselves.” He snatched up Daddy’s wig and clown nose and shoved them into his hands. “Come on!”

“Eliza, please wait here for me,” Daddy begged on his way out the door. “Give me a chance to explain. Talk to your mother for a while. I’ll be back in half an hour, tops.” He took off with Charlie, running across the field toward the Big Top.

I waited until they were out of earshot. “Good-bye, Mama,” I said quietly.

“No, Sugar, wait!” She tried to stand but she was too wobbly— too drunk—to chase me.

I calmly walked back to the women’s sleeping car, packed up everything I owned that wasn’t already in the baggage car, and gathered all the money I’d saved from working at the concession stand. Then I left the Bennett Brothers’ Circus for good.

The circus train was parked in a freight yard, so I had to walk almost a mile up the track through the rail yard to get to the passenger station. It was a huge, cavernous building, with so much space up by the ceiling that they could have had three or four trapeze acts and a couple of high-wire walkers up there at the same time. After living in cramped rail cars and tents all my life, I couldn’t understand the waste of such a building. It made me feel very tiny, the way poor Aunt Peanut must feel all the time, living in a big person’s world.

The station was a busy place, all lit up and bustling with people. Porters hauled huge carts of luggage to and fro, uniformed soldiers milled around looking lost, and exhausted families sat waiting on crowded benches, their babies wailing. I surveyed it all, wondering what to do, until I saw the window labeled “ticket sales,” and a knot of people lined up in front of it. My feet made a sharp tapping sound that echoed on the marble floor as I walked over to the window.

“When does the next train leave?” I asked when it was finally my turn. The harried-looking agent behind the little window seemed distracted.

“Uh...The next train to where, miss?”

“Anywhere! I don’t care. I just want the very next train.”

He looked up at me for the first time and stroked his walrus mustache. “Listen, you look like a nice young lady. If you’re thinking of running away from home, I’m sure that your family—” The word *family* made me cold with fury. “I don’t have a family,” I said. “I’m not a child, I’m eighteen. Now please do your job and tell me when the next train leaves.”

I realized after I had kids of my own that the man was just trying to keep me from making a big mistake, but at the time he seemed like a busybody. He took his time answering my question, stroking his mustache like he was petting a dog.

“Well, the train sitting on track five leaves in ten minutes,” he said slowly. “It’s northbound for Memphis, Louisville, Indianapolis, and points north.”

I laid some of my money on the counter. “Kindly give me a ticket for as far as this will take me.”

The ticket agent did not look happy. He kept glancing up at me as if memorizing the details of what I looked like and how I was dressed in case someone sent the police after me. But I knew my daddy wouldn’t do that. The circus train would probably be in Arkansas before he even figured out I was missing.

“Do you have any baggage to check, miss?” the agent asked.

“I’d like to keep my suitcase with me, thank you.”

I had already decided that I would watch out the window until I saw a town I liked and then just step off the train when it stopped there. It might be any one of the thousands of towns I’d traveled through over the years, towns I’d begged Daddy to settle down in. My dream house would be in a quiet little village where all my neighbors knew me and greeted me by name.

As soon as the agent handed me my ticket, I hurried down to track

five and climbed aboard. I found my seat in the coach section and set my suitcase down by my feet, glad to see an empty seat beside mine. Five minutes later the train lurched forward, then slowly rolled out of the station. We passed The Bennett Brothers' Circus train on a sidetrack a few minutes later and quickly left it far behind.



## ~ Hoofstuk sewentien ~

Tog huil ek. Vir dae aaneen. Dit is 'n wonder dat Pappa se narkostuum nie muwwerig word nie. Ek klou met soveel mag aan sy los broek vas dat hy geen ander keuse het as om my oral saam met hom te vat nie. Tydens die optog steek hy my by sy voete op die wa se vloer weg, en tydens die middag- en aandvertonings laat hy my op 'n spesiale stoel langs die orkes se verhoog sit. Ek kyk oor en oor na die Bennett Brothers-sirkus se vertonings totdat ek elke vertoning en al die musiek uit my kop ken.

Die herinneringe aan my ma begin uiteindelik vervaag en my lewe pas by die nuwe roetine aan. Vroeg elke oggend kom die trein tot stilstand en ek word in 'n nuwe dorp wakker met die geluid van die werkers se geskree en gefluit terwyl hulle die plat goederewaens se vrag op 'n oop stuk veld uitpak. Hulle pak eerste die kookhuis- en kostuumwaens af sodat die kunstenaars ontbyt kan eet en dan kan aantrek vir die optog. Ná ontbyt gaan ek saam met Pappa na die kostuumtent toe en kyk hoe hy sy narkostuum en pruik aantrek en dan sy grimering opsit. Hy teken groot wit kringe om sy oë en mond, dan teken hy die buitelyn met swart. Teen die tyd dat hy sy glimlaggende rooi lippe verf en sy groot neus opsit, lyk hy nie meer soos my aantreklike pappa nie.

Intussen slaan die werkers en tentopslaners die tentdorp op. Ek het later in 'n Episkopaalse kerk in Milwaukee 'n preek gehoor van hoe Esegiël gepraat het en toe word die dooie bene lewendig en staan op, en toe het ek gedink dit moes seker presies gelyk het soos die beendere van daardie tente wat bymekaar kom – eers die geraamte, dan die vel van seil wat oorgetrek word, dan word dit gevul met musiek en verwondering en lewe.

Die eerste gebeurtenis in elke dorp is altyd die optog. Dit gee die dorpsmense 'n voorsmakie van wat die sirkus het om te bied en lok hulle om kaartjies vir die groot sirkustent te koop. By die meeste van die plekke wat ons besoek, is die sirkus die enigste vorm van vermaak wat die mense die hele jaar het, en wanneer ons opdaag, maak bykans die hele dorp toe asof dit 'n vakansiedag is. Waar anders kan boere wat die hele jaar lank aan hulle grond en diere verbind is, leeus en olifante en dansende bere en enorme slange sien?

Die groot Percheron-perde wat so hard gewerk het om die goederewaens af te laai, word vinnig versier met vere en skitterende harnasse sodat hulle die sirkuswaens in die optog kan trek. Die orkesmeester deel sy orkes in twee

sodat die helfte van die musikante op die voorste orkeswa ry terwyl die ander helfte op 'n wa in die middel van die optog saam met van die kunstenaars is. Hierdie waens is oortrek met pragtig uitgekerfde patrone, helderkleurige verf en bladgoud wat verskillende feevertale uitbeeld. Toe ek ouer is, trek tannie Peanut my eenkeer soos Aspoestertjie aan en ry ek op een van die waens terwyl ek 'n glasskoen in my een hand hou en met die ander hand vir die skare waai. Ek het dit baie geniet totdat Pappa dit stopgesit het. Hy het gesê die mense se toejuiging kan dalk na my kop toe gaan en dan vloei die sirkus deur my are, wat die heel laaste ding in die wêreld is wat hy vir my wil hê.

Die narre stap in die middel van die optog terwyl hulle grappe maak en almal laat lag. Pappa loop partykeer op lang stelte wat hom drie meter lank laat lyk. Die leus en tiere kom in hulle hokke op waens verby wat deur nog perde getrek word, maar Gunther maak net een of twee van die hokke oop om seker te maak die mense kom sirkus toe om meer te sien. Die olifante stap nader aan die einde van die optog, want dit is wat almal die graagste wil sien. Die Gambrini-gesin, wat ons olifante afrig, trek vir hulle drie kinders blink kostuums aan en laat hulle op die olifante ry van waar hulle vir die mense waai.

Heel agter kom die stoomorrel wat op 'n wa in die strate verbyrammel met die gekweel van pyporrels en die geluid van tromme, simbale, xilofone en klokke. Mense val agter die stoomorrel in en volg ons terug na die sirkusgronde om na die vertoning te kom kyk. Hulle het tyd om na tannie Peanut-hulle se byvertoning te kyk, die menagerietent te besoek waar al die diere is en om spookasem en Cracker Jack te koop voordat die middag se hoofvertoning begin.

Ná die optog vat Pappa 'n vinnige blaaskans om sy asem terug te kry en dan eet ons middagete in die kostent. Dan moet die narre egter teruggaan na die hooftent om die kinders te vermaak terwyl die mense instroom om na die vertoning te kyk. Wanneer die vertoning uiteindelik begin, loop Pappa weer op sy stelte in die aanvangsoptog saam met die hele sirkusgeselskap. Daarna kom hy vier of vyf keer tydens die vertoning terug om sy snaakse items saam met die ander narre te doen. Dit is hulle werk om die mense te vermaak terwyl die werkers skoonmaak agter die olifante of die verskillende kunstenaars se toerusting rondskuif. Pappa is ook 'n uitstekende waagkunstenaar en hy doen 'n nar-roetine terwyl hy op een van die skouperde ry. Hy maak of die perd met hom weghardloop en hy om lewe en dood moet vasklou. Ek het my halfdood geskrik die eerste paar keer toe ek hom dit sien doen het – hy ry terwyl hy na agter kyk, “val” af sodat hy onder die perd se maag hang en staan tot op sy hande op die perd se rug.

Die sirkus doen twee hoofvertonings in die meeste dorpe wat ons besoek, een in die middag en een in die aand. My pappa kry eers 'n kans om te gaan sit en sy oorgroot skoene uit te trek wanneer die gehoor uiteindelik die tent verlaat.

Tydens die laaste vertoning begin die arbeiders solank ons tentdorp opslaan, en los die groot markiestent en die kleedkamertent tot heel laaste. Hulle pak alles op die trein in die volgorde waarin ons dit op die volgende dorp gaan nodig kry, en sodra hulle die laaste tentpen gelaai het, klim almal op die trein. Ons slaap deur die nag terwyl die lokomotief die vyf standaardwaens, tien goederewaens en vier passasierswaens na die volgende dorp trek. Wanneer ons die volgende oggend wakker word, begin die hele proses van voor af. Toe ek eenkeer by die Sondagskool die juffrou hoor verduidelik hoe die mense in die Bybel van die een plek na die ander met hulle tente en vee getrek het, het ek gedink dat Abraham, Isak en Jakob verseker saam met 'n sirkus moes gereis het.

Ek slaap op die opgestopte bankie in my pa se klein kompartement. Enkellopende mans soos pappa slaap gewoonlik in die slaapwa saam met die ander ongetroude mans eerder as in 'n privaat kompartement; die sirkus reserveer dit gewoonlik vir hulle beste kunstenaars en gesinne. Die Bennettbroers heg egter groot waarde aan Pappa en het hom in beheer oor al die narre aangestel. Toe het hy hulle oortuig dat hy ruimte nodig het om al die narre se items uit te werk en met nuwe poetse en toertjies vorendag te kom. Toe ek te groot is om op die klein bankie te slaap, bou een van die skrynwerkers vir my 'n bed wat bo Pappa s'n oopvou.

Ná die laaste vertoning vir die dag het my pappa tyd nodig om te ontspan; daarom gaan hy elke aand vir 'n rukkie na die eetwa om saam met die ander kunstenaars 'n potjie kaart te speel. Hy luister egter altyd eers hoe ek bid en dan druk hy die beddegoed styf om my in en sê: “Mag die Here sy engele om jou hou.”

Teen die tyd dat my eerste seisoen saam met die Bennett Brothers-sirkus tot 'n einde kom en ons terugkeer na ons winterhuis in Macon, Georgia, klou ek nie meer dag en nag aan my pappa vas nie. Ek is eintlik al siek en sat daarvoor om dieselfde vertoning twee keer 'n dag te sien en ek smee hom om my eerder buite op die “werf” agter die groot markiestent te los. Die ander kunstenaars vergesel my vrolik van die een tent na die ander terwyl Pappa werk en daar is altyd 'n gewillige paar arms om my vas te hou. Hulle behoort dalk aan 'n nar of 'n akrobaat of 'n ruiter, maar iemand hou altyd 'n ogie oor my.

Ek voel uiteindelik oral tuis en almal ken my en gee vir my klein werkies

om te doen. Gunther leer my hoe om vir sy leeus en tiere water te gee sonder om bang te wees. Meneer Gambrini vat my altyd saam met sy drie kinders af rivier toe wanneer die olifante daar gaan afkoel. Hy leer my swem en ook hoe om op die olifante te ry. Lazlo leer my die kunsies van balle in die lug gooi; ons begin met twee balle en later kan ek dit met vier doen. Hy leer my ook touspring, alhoewel Lazlo kan spring terwyl hy op 'n gespanne kabel staan, maar ek net op die grond. Charlie die nar leer my fietsry. Hy het 'n sjimpansee met die naam Zippy wat as deel van hulle vertoning fietsry en Charlie betaal my soms om hom op te pas. Die moeilikste deel van dié taak is om te keer dat Zippy rook. Hy het dit begin nadat hy die ander kunstenaars sien rook het en nou tel hy die sigarette op wat hulle neergooi wanneer dit hulle beurt is om in die markiestent op te tree. Dié sjimpansee kan tot ringetjies blaas met die rook.

“Moenie dat hy enige stompies in die hande kry nie, Eliza,” waarsku Charlie wanneer hy my in beheer los. “Hy begin al 'n regte rokershoesie kry.” Zippy is egter blitsvinnig en as ek nie eerste by die stompies uitkom en dit dooddruk nie, sal Zippy dit gryp en vervaard daaraan begin suig. Dan is daar geen manier op aarde om die stompies by hom te vat nie.

Toe ek ouer is, leer Pappa my lees en dan stuur hy my elke dag vir drie tot vier ure “skool” toe saam met die ander sirkuskinders. Daar is nooit meer as 'n dosyn van ons nie. Ons ouers maak beurte as onderwysers. Almal behalwe ek neem deel aan hulle ouers se items en het twee vertonings op 'n dag. Ons leerplan het dus nie veel struktuur nie. Pappa skryf my eenkeer by 'n gewone skool in vir die maande wat ons sirkus in Georgia deurbring. Ek haat dit. Ek verskil so baie van die ander kinders dat dit onmoontlik is vir my om in te pas en aanvaar te word. Ek huil en stamp my voete en gaan tekere totdat Pappa uiteindelik die idee laat vaar. Ek gaan terug “skool” toe saam met die ander sirkuskinders wat tussen hulle oefensessies plaasvind omdat hulle nou nuwe toertjies vir die komende seisoen moet leer.

Ek wil vreeslik graag deel wees van my pa se vertoning, of eintlik sommer van enige ander vertoning. Die Gambrini-kinders dra versierde kostuums en ry op die olifante; hulle glimlag breed en sprei hulle arms grasieus oop terwyl hulle hul talente ten toon stel. Een olifant lig klein Angela Gambrini hoog in die lug met sy slurp terwyl sy vir die juigende skare waai. Nog 'n ander sirkus-gesin lei die honde en perde op en hulle twee jong seuns weet hoe om die diere deur hulle hele roetine te neem nog voordat hulle kan lees. Die perderuiters balanseer hulle kinders hoog op hulle skouers terwyl hulle op die perd se rug staan en deur die arena galop.

Pappa weier egter volstrek dat ek deel kan word van die sirkus. Toe hy

Gina uitvang waar sy my leer om teen die tou op te klouter waarmee sy haar vertoning doen, trap hy haar vreeslik uit en praat dan 'n hele maand lank nie met haar nie. Ek bied aan om op die olifante te ry toe die Gambrini-kinders waterpokkies kry, maar Pappa sê: “Beslis nie!” Hy is egter op sy kwaadste toe ek vir Charlie die nar oorreed om my gesig te verf sodat dit net soos my pa s'n lyk. Pappa is woedend vir albei van ons.

“Jy is afgedank, Charlie!” skree hy. “En jy! Jy gaan nou dadelik daardie gemors afwas.” Hy sleep my aan my kraag na die washuis toe. Ek het hom nog nooit so kwaad gesien nie.

“Hoekom wil Pappa nie hê ek moet 'n nar wees nie?” huil ek terwyl hy my gesig skoon skrop. Dit is 'n wonder dat hy nie die vel ook afskrop nie.

“Jy is vir 'n week gehok,” antwoord hy.

“Wat daarvan? Ek is in elk geval die hele tyd gehok. Ek het niks om die hele dag lank te doen nie, Pappa. Almal is deel van die vertoning, behalwe ek. Waar pas ek in?”

“Jy pas nie in nie. Jy is nie deel van hierdie sirkus nie en vir so lank as wat ek 'n sê daarin het, sal jy ook nie deel word daarvan nie.”

“Maar hoekom nie?”

Hy hou uiteindelik op met sy genadelose geskrop en gooi vir my 'n handdoek. “Luister, ek maak jou hier groot, want ek het geen ander keuse nie. Ek wil egter hê jy moet eendag vir jou 'n beter lewe maak, weg van hierdie plek af.”

Ek kyk op na sy woedende gesig en kwaai oë, en ek begin bewe. “Pappa wil my nie hê nie, nè?”

“Natuurlik wil ek jou hê, maar – ”

“Nee, Pappa wil nie. Vandat Mamma dood is, wens Pappa al ek moet verdwyn. Mamma het altyd vir my gesê hoe lief sy vir my is, maar Pappa doen dit nooit nie. Pappa is glad nie lief vir my nie. Die enigste mens vir wie Pappa omgee, is jouself.”

My woorde slaan hom stom. Die woede in sy oë verander in pyn. “Eliza, as ek nie so lief was vir jou nie, sou ek nie bereid gewees het om jou te laat gaan nie.”

“Dit maak nie sin nie.”

“Ja, dit maak sin. Luister ... ” Hy soek na woorde, trek sy vingers deur sy pikswart hare. “As ... as ek net vir myself omgee het, sou ek jou probeer maak het wat ek is. Ek sou dan wou hê jy moet eendag in my spore volg en die een of ander nar-dinastie opbou. Maar jy is nie ek nie; jy is jou eie unieke mens.” Hy buk voor my en raak sag aan my skouers. “Daar is 'n hele wêreld daarbuite, weg van die sirkus af, Eliza. Ek wil nie hê jy moet soos ek 'n nar

wees nie. Ek wil hê jy moet wees wat jy bedoel is om te wees.”

“Maar ... Wat is ek bedoel om te wees, Pappa?”

Hy vat die handdoek by my en droog versigtig my trane daarmee af. “Ek weet nie, Eliza. Dit is iets wat jy self sal moet ontdek.”

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Daarna het ek baie oor my pappa se woorde nagedink, maar ek onthou nog duidelik die dag toe alles vir my verander het; die dag toe ek nie langer deel wou word van die sirkus nie. Ek was twaalf jaar oud en het by ’n stalletjie buite die groot markiestent gehelp toe ’n jong gesin naderkom om spookasem te koop. Die ma het ’n mooi blou-en-wit rok aangehad en die pa sy Sondaghemp en netjiese broek. Hy het haar op ’n sagte, liefdevolle manier “skat” genoem toe hulle vir hul twee kinders, ’n seuntjie en ’n dogtertjie, spookasem koop. Die ma hurk toe by die kinders en help hulle geduldig totdat hulle verstaan hoe om dit te eet terwyl sy saam met hulle lag. Die pa het egter nie vir sy kinders gekyk nie. Hy het vir sy vrou se gesig gekyk en die teerheid wat ek in sy oë gesien het, het sy eenvoudige, growwe gelaatstrekke verander.

Toe hulle by die diere se tent ingaan, verlaat ek my pos by die spookasemstalletjie en volg hulle. Die pa koop ’n sakkie grondboontjies sodat sy seun dit vir die olifante kan voer, maar die seun is bang om dit te doen en die pa lig hom toe in sy arms op. Die ma hou die klein dogtertjie se hand styf vas terwyl hulle na die tiere kyk.

Ek moet teruggaan na my stalletjie toe, maar toe die vertoning begin, gaan ek by die groot markiestent in en soek deur die pawiljoene na daardie gesin. Ek kry hulle nie. In plaas daarvan sien ek honderde gesinne net soos hulle – ma’s en pa’s en grootouers en kinders, almal wat saam lag en die sirkus geniet. Die pyn wat ek ervaar, is so folterend en dit voel byna of ek van die akrobate se hoë kabel afgeval het. Dit slaan my wind heeltemal uit. Vir die eerste keer in my lewe weet ek dat ek iets mis – ’n familie – en ek smag met my hele hart daarna.

Toe die vertoning verby is, gaan staan ek by die hoofuitgang terwyl die mense na buite stroom en ek sien uiteindelik die gesin van vroeër. Die pa dra sy slapende dogter in sy arms terwyl die ma die seuntjie se hand vashou. Hulle sal teruggaan na die huis wat hulle deel met ’n gesellige kombuis, beddens met kwilte op en ’n warm stofie in die voorkamer. Hulle sal môre en elke ander oggend wakker word in dieselfde huis en in dieselfde klein dorpie waar almal hulle name ken.

Ek stap uit na my “agterplaas”. Die arbeiders het die tentdorp byna heeltemal afgeslaan en die meeste goed reeds op die goederewaens gelaai. Ek sien vir Pappa in sy lawwe narkostuum en oorgroot skoene en tannie Peanut wat klein genoeg is sodat ek haar kan optel, en ek haat hulle. Vir die eerste keer in my lewe smag ek na ’n regte familie, nie ’n vreemde versameling sirkusmense by wie ek grootword nie.

Dié verlange gaan nooit weg nie. Wanneer die sirkustrein deur die nag ry, sien ek die warm ligte wat in die huise brand waarby ons verbygaan, en dan rou ek omdat ek nie in een van hulle bly nie. Die trein se fluit is ’n eensame geluid wat altyd trane na my oë bring. Dit beteken ons beweeg aan na ’n ander dorp, ’n ander staat, waar ek net ’n vreemdeling is. Wat dit nog erger maak, is dat ek deel is van ’n lawaaierige groep sirkusfratse, en mense kyk met agterdog en wantroue na ons oral waar ons gaan. Die gemeenskap sluit al hulle deure wanneer die sirkus in die dorp is.

Dag ná dag kyk ek na die ouers wat hulle kinders sirkus toe bring en ek beny hulle; ma’s en dogtertjies met mooi rokke aan, pa’s wat vir hulle seuns Cracker Jack en spookasem koop. By elke moontlike geleentheid smee ek my pa om die sirkus te verlaat sodat ons ’n regte gesin kan wees en in ’n regte huis kan bly in plaas van ’n treinkompartement.

Maar Pappa sug altyd en sê: “Dit is my werk, Eliza. Ek hou daarvan om dit te doen.” Dan sal die werkers die laaiplanke agter die goederewaens laat sak en die kleurvolle sirkuswaens sal weer tot op die trein rol, en die sirkus sal aanbeweeg na die volgende dorp. En ek sal saamgaan.

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Pappa wou wel nie toelaat dat ek enige sirkustoertjies leer nie, maar hy maak seker ek leer sommige van die vaardighede wat ek in die buitewêreld sal nodig kry. Ek leer by die kookhuis se kokke hoe om kos te maak en dit is ook maar goed dat my man ’n groot aptyt gehad het, want hulle leer my om alles in grootmaat te maak. Die kostuummakers leer my naaldwerk doen en toe ek ’n tiener is, leer Gina en Luisa my hoe om grimering te gebruik en my hare te doen. Charlie en die ander narre leer my om vir myself en die lewe te lag. Ek hanteer ’n sjimpansee en olifante en selfs ’n opgeleide beer; daarom is ek nooit bang vir varke en koeie en hoenders nie.

Die byvertoning se mense vir wie ek eens op ’n tyd so bang was, leer my om nie neer te sien op mense wat anders is nie. “Dit is die hart wat saak maak,” leer tannie Peanut my, “nie hoe mense uiterlik lyk nie. Sommige van

die aantreklikste mense in die wêreld het 'n hart wat erger stink as olifantmis.”

Ek leer wat dit beteken om buigsaam te bly en krisisse te hanteer wanneer die sirkus allerhande probleme moet trotseer – orkeslede wat skielik tussen vertonings bedank, werkers wat dronk word en die trein mis, perde met gebreekte bene en windstorms wat reën tot in die kostuumtent waai sodat al die klere papnat is. Selfs van die beste kunstenaars val soms en kry seer of 'n vangskoot tussen twee sweefstokartieste loop skeef en het gebreekte tande en 'n gekneusde kakebeen tot gevolg. Toe ons beste perderuiter haar enkel breek, sit haar broer 'n pruik op en trek haar kostuum aan om haar plek in te neem. Ons kry te doen met modderige terreine, vertonings wat gekanselleer word omdat dit weke lank reën en selfs salarisse wat nie betaal word nie. Ons beleef darem nooit 'n treinramp nie, maar ons hoor gruwelverhale van ander sirkusse met wie dit wel gebeur het; dus is die vrees altyd daar.

My godsdienstige opleiding is 'n laslappiekwilt van oortuigings, aanmeakaargewerk deur 'n verskeidenheid denominasies en preke in kerke oor die hele Amerika. Ons het gewoonlik Sondae af en Pappa maak altyd seker ek gaan kerk toe as hy een in die nabye omgewing kan kry. Ek onthou nog hoe ek as klein dogtertjie in een van die agterste banke op sy skoot sou sit en luister na die pragtige musiek en die sagte gebede, en dan sou ek wonder oor hierdie hemelse Vader van wie almal altyd praat. Hy dra tog sekerlik nie 'n narpruik en oorgroot skoene nie. Die predikers sê almal Hy woon in 'n huis met baie kamers in 'n plek wat hulle die hemel noem, nie in 'n treinkompartement nie.

Een Sondag nadat ek 'n diens in 'n Ortodokse kerk bygewoon en na 'n preek oor Adam en Eva geluister het, was ek so woedend soos 'n perdeby. Ek konfronteer my pappa oor wat ek gehoor het terwyl hy saam met my terugstap na die sirkusterrein.

“Pappa sê altyd ek moet doen wat die Goeie Boek sê, maar Pappa doen dit nie. Die Bybel sê dit is nie goed vir 'n man om alleen te woon nie. Dit is hoekom God vir Adam 'n helper gemaak het.” Ek stamp my voete hard op die sypaadjie om my woorde te beklemtoon. Dit lyk of Pappa die feit dat ek so opgewerk is heel amusant vind.

“Ek woon nie alleen nie,” lag hy. “Ek woon saam met jou – om nie van drie of vier dosyn ander kunstenaars te praat nie.”

“Dit is nie wat die Bybel bedoel nie, en Pappa weet dit. Pappa het 'n vrou nodig.”

Sy glimlag verdwyn. “Ek het 'n vrou gehad – jou ma – en dit het nie so goed uitgewerk nie.”



“Wel, Mamma is dood en ek dink dit is hoog tyd dat Pappa weer trou. Ek het ’n ma nodig en Pappa ’n helper. Hoekom trou Pappa nie met tannie Peanut nie, maar hierdie keer regtig?”

Pappa en tannie Peanut “trou” tydens elke vertoning. Hy loop op stelte rond en aangesien hy so lank en sy so kort is, kan hy nie sy nuwe “bruid” soen nie. Nadat Pappa drie of vier skreesnaakse maniere probeer wat nie werk nie, kom die akrobate uiteindelik en help die pasgetroudes deur op mekaar se skouers te staan en dan vir Peanut al hoër en hoër te lig totdat sy en Pappa uiteindelik soen en die gehoor hulle toejuig.

“Jy maak seker ’n grap, nè?” vra Pappa. “Wil jy hê ek moet met Peanut trou?”

“Moenie lag nie. Ek is lief vir tannie Peanut ... en sy is lief vir Pappa.” Hy kyk bekommerd na my. “Dit is waar, Pappa. Sy was nog altyd mal oor Pappa. As Pappa nie so baie by Gina en Luisa en al die ander mooi meisies aangelê het nie, sou Pappa gesien het hoe lief sy vir Pappa is.”

“Wel, ek is jammer,” sug hy, “maar ek voel nie dieselfde oor haar nie. Sy is ’n goeie vriend en dis al. My liefdeslewe het in elk geval niks met jou te doen nie.”

Ons kom by ’n kruising en ek is so opgewerk dat ek die besige straat in stap sonder om te kyk, reg voor ’n aankomende kar in. Pappa steek sy arm net betyds uit en trek my terug.

“Hei! Pasop, Eliza!” Die noue ontkoming laat hom skrik. Hy buk voor my en vat my aan die skouers vas. “Is jy oukei?” Ons kyk mekaar vas in die oë en my gewoonlik arrogante pa lyk bleek.

“Ek makeer niks.” Die noue ontkoming raak my skaars. Ek wil antwoorde hê. “Hoekom het Pappa nie by Mamma gebly toe ek klein was nie?” vra ek.

Hy staan regop en skud sy kop. Ons begin weer stap en ek dink nie hy gaan my ooit antwoord nie; daarom is ek verbaas toe hy dit wel doen.

“Daardie huwelik was reg van die begin af ’n ramp,” sê hy. “Ons het in die Vaudeville ontmoet waar jou ma die stersanger was en ek en Charlie ’n komedievertoning gedoen het. Yvette het gesê sy is lief vir my, maar sy het altyd gehaat wat ek doen; dit gehaat dat ek my gesig met grimeersel bedek en simpel klere aantrek. Sy het my probeer verander. My gedwing om na ander werk te soek. Toe sy so erg begin drink het, het ek haar probeer verander. Dit werk nooit nie. ’n Mens aanvaar mekaar soos julle is, of dit is verby. Vir ons was dit verby. Ek het werk gekry by die Bennett Brothers en saam met die sirkus die pad gevat. Sy het met jou in New Orleans gebly. Sy het gesê sy wil nie meer rondreis nie.”

Toe ons nog ’n kruising nader, vat Pappa my hand. Ek besluit die noue

ontkoming met die kar het hom laat skrik, want dit is een van die min kere dat hy dit ooit gedoen het.

“Ek vertel dit alles vir jou,” gaan hy voort, “want ek wil nie hê jy moet droogmaak soos ek en jou ma nie. Die Goeie Boek is reg – mense moenie alleen leef nie. Jy moet egter met iemand trou wat saam met jou sal werk, Eliza, soos ’n span. Nie iemand wat jou probeer verander nie. Kyk ’n bietjie hoe die Fralangas saamwerk wanneer hulle daarbo in die lug van die een swaai en hand na die ander sweef. Hulle vertrou mekaar. Hulle plaas elke dag hulle lewe in mekaar se hande. Hulle is ook altyd daar om die ander persoon te vang voordat hy val. Dit is wat ’n man en vrou moet hê. Spanwerk en vertrou.”

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In my tienerjare besluit tannie Peanut ek het die geselskap van ander vroue nodig om my te help lei; daarom trek ek uit Pappa se kompartement uit na die vroue se slaapwa. Die ou Pullman-wa was eens deel van ’n passasierstrein, maar hulle het hom aangepas vir die sirkus se gebruik. Daar is hoegenaamd niks moois omtrent dié leefkwartiere nie. Die wa is vol en warm met ’n smal gangetjie in die middel en twee beddens bo-op mekaar en oorkant mekaar. Elke slaapplek het lewerkleurige gordyne op ringetjies wat jy kan toetrek vir “privaatheid”, maar dit hou nie almal se gesnork en gegiggel en trane uit nie. Ook nie geheime nie. Ek weet wie baklei, wie verlief is en wie dit oorweeg om te dros.

Ek voel sommer groot om so op my eie te bly en soos die ander vroue met wie ek my ruimte deel, begin ek ook in die teenoorgestelde geslag belangstel. Ek soen ’n seun – een van die staljongens – vir die heel eerste keer een aand toe hy ná die aandvertoning saam met my na die vroue se slaapwa stap. Ek het nie gedink my pa weet wat ek doen nou dat ek nie meer by hom bly nie, maar ek vind dié aand uit dat ek verkeerd is. Ons het skaars tyd om agter die wa te verdwyn vir een ou soentjie toe Pappa om die hoek kom met vuur in sy oë. Die arme ou het weggehardloop en ek dink hy het eers gaan staan nadat hy die staat se grens oorgesteek het.

Intussen sleep my pa my na sy kompartement, en langs die pad sleep hy sommer vir arme tannie Peanut saam. Hy is woedend en ek is bang. Ek het geen idee wat ek verkeerd gedoen het nie. Ek sit ineengekrimp langs Peanut op die klein bankie terwyl Pappa soos een van Gunther se leeus deur die klein spasie loop. Hy brul ook soos een.

“Wat de hel dink jy doen jy? Ouens soos hy soek net een ding, Eliza.”

Hy gluur my aan asof ek presies moet weet wat daardie een ding is, maar ek is verskriklik naïef. “Wat, Pappa? Ek het niks gedoen nie.”

Ek is nog meer verward toe Pappa skielik bloos. “Vertel haar, Peanut,” mompel hy.

“O nee, ek gaan dit nie doen nie. Dit is jou werk, Henry.” Sy spring van die bankie af en stap aan deur toe so vinnig as wat haar kort beentjies haar kan dra.

Pappa keer haar. “Wel, ek vra jou om my te help.”

“O nee. Ek gaan spore maak.” Haar stem is skiller as gewoonlik.

Hulle bly so redeneer totdat ek lus voel om te skree. “Vertel my wát?” skree ek en slaan met my vuus op die tafel.

Tannie Peanut gee uiteindelik in. Sy skop vir Pappa uit die kompartement uit en vertel my die feite van die lewe. Sy sluit haar verduideliking af deur te sê: “Sien jy nou? Die meeste seuns sal nie moeite doen om die koei te koop terwyl hulle die melk verniet kan kry nie. Wag vir ’n trouing, liefie. Wag vir die regte man.”

Vir ’n paar weke daarná is ek sommer vies vir seuns, my pa, tannie Peanut en die wêreld oor die algemeen.

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Kort ná my agtiende verjaardag tree die sirkus in New Orleans op. Charlie het my vertel dat hy en Pappa in New Orleans grootgeword het en dat ek hier saam met my ma gebly het. Die laaste vertoning van ons twee dae in dié dorp is op die punt om te begin toe Charlie haastig by die stalletjie aankom waar ek werk. Hy is heel uitasem.

“Waar is jou pa, Eliza? Het jy hom gesien?”

“Nee, nie ná middagete nie. Hoekom?”

“Die vertoning gaan begin. Hy het reeds die voorvertoning gemis en hy is veronderstel om nou die aanvang van die hoofvertoning te lei.”

Ek kan dit nie glo nie. “Is Pappa ... weg?”

“Ja. Ek het al oral na hom gesoek en kan hom nie kry nie.”

Ek is skielik vreeslik bang. My pa is nooit laat vir ’n vertoning nie, wat nog te sê een heeltemal mis. “Ek sal jou help om na hom te soek,” sê ek. Ek sit die spookasemmasjien af, gee die kontanttrommel vir die kassier en hardloop dan na die area agter die tente terwyl ek bid dat daar nie iets verskrikliks met hom gebeur het nie.

Hy is nie in die narre se tent nie. Hy is ook nie in die kleedkamertent nie en die perd waarop hy altyd ry, staan steeds vasgemaak. Die sirkuswaens staan heeltemal aan die ander kant van die oop stuk veld, maar ek hardloop al die pad daarheen toe ek nie aan ander plekke kan dink om te soek nie. Ek hardloop na Pappa se kompartement toe en pluk die deur oop sonder om te klop. Dan steek ek in my spore vas.

Pappa is in die kompartement. Hy sit by die klein tafeltjie, en reg langs hom sit my mamma. Sy is toe nie dood nie! Sy lyk net so maer en siek soos die dag toe sy my verlaat het – dertien jaar gelede – maar sy leef.

“Eliza? Skattebol, is dit jy?” vra Mamma. “Sjoe, maar jy is ’n pragtige jong dame, skattebol. Is sy nie pragtig nie, Henri?”

Selfs al het ek nie Mamma se gesig herken nie, sou ek haar kon uitken aan haar fluweelagtige stem, en die bottel amber “medisyne” wat voor haar op die tafel staan. Ek is byna te stomgeslaan om te praat.

“Mamma? Jy ... jy leef?”

“Wel, ek sou so dink, skattebol,” sê sy en lag. “Of het ten minste nog geleef die laaste keer toe ek gekyk het.”

Dit maak nie vir my sin nie. As Mamma leef, waarom het sy dan weggegaan en my hier by Pappa gelos? En hoekom het my pappa al die jare vir my gejok en my laat dink my ma is dood terwyl sy nie is nie? Ek kyk van die een na die ander en die woede en verraad groei in my totdat dit uiteindelik ontplof.

“Pappa het vir my gejok!”

“Ek het nie gejok nie. Ek het nooit gesê – ”

“Ja, Pappa het! Pappa het geweet ek dink Mamma is dood en Pappa het my laat dink dit is die waarheid.”

“Eliza, laat ek verduidelik ... ”

“Nee! Hoekom moet ek ’n woord glo wat Pappa sê? Pappa en Mamma kon al hierdie jare saamgebly en vir my ’n huis gegee het sodat ek ’n ma en ’n pa kan hê soos al die ander kinders, maar julle al twee is te selfsugtig.”

“Dit is nie waar nie – ”

“Julle wou my nooit gehad nie. Nie een van julle nie. Mamma het my hier kom aflaai, want sy wou my nie – ”

“Nee, skattebol, ek is so lief vir jou dat – ”

“En Pappa wou my ook nie gehad het nie. Pappa probeer al jare lank van my ontslae raak deur vir my te sê ek moet die sirkus verlaat en op my eie gaan bly. Wel, julle albei se wens word nou waar. Julle sal my nooit weer sien nie!” Ek draai om om by die deur uit te hardloop, maar stamp teen Charlie.

“Daar is jy, Henry,” roep hy uit. “Wat de hel doen jy nog hier? Komaan!”

Pappa spring op. “Goeie genugtig! Hoe laat is dit?”

“Jy het reeds die begin van die hoofvertoning gemis en dit is byna tyd vir jou rit op die perd. Kyk na jou! Waar is jou gesig?”

Pappa se gesig is skoon. Sy pruik en rooi neus lê op sy bed langs die vuil handdoek wat hy gebruik het om die grimeersel mee af te vee. Hy kyk van Charlie na my, dan na Mamma, en ek kan sien hy voel in twee geskeur.

“Jy moet vir my instaan, Charlie,” smeeek hy. “Ek is nou besig hier –”

“Is jy mal? Ek kan nie jou roetine op die perd doen nie, nie een van ons kan nie. Ons sal onself verongeluk.” Hy gryp Pappa se pruik en neus en druk dit in sy hande. “Komaan!”

“Eliza, wag asseblief hier vir my,” smeeek Pappa op pad by die deur uit. “Gee my ’n kans om te verduidelik. Gesels ’n rukkie met jou ma. Ek sal oor ’n halfuur terug wees.” Dan hardloop hy en Charlie oor die oop stuk veld in die rigting van die groot markiestent.

Ek wag totdat hulle buite hoorafstand is. “Totsiens, Mamma,” sê ek sag.

“Nee, skattebol, wag.” Sy probeer staan, maar sy is te onvas – te dronk – om my agterna te sit.

Ek stap kalm terug na die vroue se slaapwa, pak alles in wat ek besit wat nog nie in die bagasiewa weggepak is nie en vat al die geld wat ek gespaar het van my werk by die spookasemstalletjie. Dan verlaat ek die Bennett Brothers-sirkus vir goed.

Die sirkustrein staan op ’n vragwerf; dus moet ek byna twee kilometer ver stap voordat ek by die passasierstasie kom. Dit is ’n groot, spelonkagtige gebou met soveel spasie bo teen die plafon dat hulle maklik drie of vier sweefstokartieste en ’n paar toulopers terselfdertyd daar kan laat optree. Nadat ek my lewe lank nog net in treinwaens en tente geleef het, kan ek nie die vermorsing van so ’n gebou verstaan nie. Dit laat my baie klein voel, soos arme tannie Peanut die hele tyd moet voel om in ’n wêreld te leef wat vir groter mense bedoel is.

Die stasie is ’n besige plek, helder verlig met mense oral. Draers trek groot trollies vol bagasie heen en weer, soldate met uniforms aan staan verlore rond en uitgeputte gesinne sit op oorvol bankies met huilende babas. Ek neem dit alles in en wonder wat om te doen, totdat ek ’n venster sien met die bordjie “Kaartjieverkope” en ’n lang ry mense wat daar staan. My skoene maak ’n harde klikgeluid wat oor die marmervloer eggo toe ek na die venster toe stap.

“Wanneer vertrek die volgende trein?” vra ek toe dit uiteindelik my beurt is. Die kaartjieverkoper agter die klein venstertjie lyk ingedagte.

“Mm ... die volgende trein waarheen, Juffrou?”

“Dit maak nie saak nie. Ek gee nie om nie. Ek wil net op die volgende trein

wees.”

Hy kyk vir die eerste keer op na my en vryf sy walrus-snor plat. “Luister, jy lyk na ’n gawe jong dame. As jy dit oorweeg om van die huis af weg te loop, is ek seker dat jou gesin – ”

Die woord “gesin” maak my koud van woede. “Ek het nie ’n gesin nie,” sê ek. “Ek is nie ’n kind nie. Ek is agtien. Doen nou asseblief jou werk en sê vir my wanneer die volgende trein vertrek.”

Nadat ek self kinders gehad het, het ek besef die man wou maar net keer dat ek ’n groot fout maak, maar in daardie stadium irriteer dit my. Hy vat sy tyd om my vraag te beantwoord en vee oor sy snor asof hy ’n hond streel.

“Wel, die trein op spoor vyf vertrek oor tien minute,” sê hy stadig. “Dit gaan noordwaarts na Memphis, Louisville, Indianapolis.”

Ek sit geld op die toonbank neer. “Gee asseblief vir my ’n kaartjie vir so ver as wat die geld my sal neem.”

Die kaartjieverkoper lyk nie gelukkig nie. Hy kyk kort-kort na my asof hy die detail van my gesig wil memoriseer asook wat ek aanhet vir ingeval iemand die polisie agter my aan stuur. Ek weeg egter my pa sal dit nie doen nie. Die sirkustrein sal waarskynlik in Arkansas wees voordat hy sal besef ek is weg.

“Het jy enige bagasie, Juffrou?” vra die agent.

“Ek sal my tas liever by my hou, dankie.”

Ek het reeds besluit ek sal by die venster uitkyk totdat ek ’n dorp sien waarvan ek hou, en dan sal ek net van die trein af klim wanneer dit daar tot stilstand kom. Dit kan enigeen van die duisende dorpe wees waardeur ek die afgelope jare gereis het, dorpe waarin ek gehoop het Pappa vir ons ’n tuiste sal maak. My droomhuis is in ’n stil klein dorpie waar al my bure my ken en my op die naam groet.

Die oomblik toe die verkoper vir my die kaartjie gee, stap ek haastig weg na perron vyf toe en gaan aan boord. Ek kry my sitplek tussen die ander passasiers en sit my tas by my voete neer, bly dat die sitplek langs my leeg is. Vyf minute later beweeg die trein vorentoe en rol dan stadig by die stasie uit. Ons ry ’n paar minute later verby die Bennett Brothers-sirkus se trein waar dit op een van die syspore staan en laat dit vinnig agter ons.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**I** think deep down I'd always known the truth—that my mother hadn't died, but had abandoned me like a litter of unwanted kittens along a country road. I hadn't wanted to face the truth. To admit what I was finally forced to face would have meant facing the why of it—why had she abandoned me? What was wrong with me that had made her turn her back and walk away from me when I was only four years old?

As I stared out of the train window that long, lonely afternoon, I was determined to put the past behind me forever. I would begin a new life and never look back. I convinced myself that I was just like the brave heroines in Betsy Gibson's books. They were often orphaned and stepping out in the world on their own, but I had a big advantage over them because I had “been around the block,” as they say, having traveled with the circus. It didn't scare me one bit to travel by train across an unknown land. And I couldn't get homesick for a home I never had, could I? I didn't know the name of the town I was searching for, but I was sure I would recognize it as soon as I saw it.

I searched all that first afternoon with no luck, then slept on the train that night, the motion rocking me to sleep as it had for most of my life. I kept watching out the window all the next day, too. Then late in the afternoon on the third day, we finally began passing through little villages like the one I had dreamt of for years. In between these towns were farmland and fruit orchards and fenced pastures with dairy cows. I saw trees for my children to climb someday and country lanes to stroll down with the man I loved on

Sunday afternoons.

When the train rolled into Deer Springs, I grabbed my suitcase and stepped off. I later learned that the passenger train only stopped there twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so it was really my lucky day to be on one of the very few trains that stopped. The little town looked perfect, even before I saw the “help wanted” sign in the window of the diner across from the railroad station.

I didn’t waste any time at all crossing the street and heading into that diner. I walked right up to Ethel Peterson, who sat at the cash register, and said, “I see by the sign in the window that you’re looking for help.”

Ethel was nearly as large as Gloria the fat lady had been, so I was counting on her to be just as jolly. But she eyed me suspiciously. “Well, that depends,” she said. “Who might you be?”

“My name is Eliza Rose Gerard, ma’am, and I just moved to town. I’m looking for work.”

“You have kinfolk here in Deer Springs?”

That’s when all the lying began. I knew that if I told the truth about growing up in the circus, I would be branded a wild woman with loose morals, because that’s the reputation circus people had. If I told them my daddy was a clown and my mama was a drunk, I would never have a chance for the respectable life I dreamed of having. I made up my mind to lie—and once you start lying, you can never stop, of course.

“I don’t have kinfolk anywhere,” I said, in a pitiful sort of voice. “My mama, daddy, and two sisters all died in the influenza epidemic last fall. In fact, I pretty nearly died myself. I decided to move somewhere and start a new life because the memories were just too painful to bear. I could really use the work, ma’am, if you’re still looking for somebody.”

I knew I had to change the subject fast before she had a chance to



ask where my home had been. Fortunately it was close to suppertime and the restaurant started getting a little busy just then, so Ethel didn't have a lot of time to question me.

"How're you at figuring?" She handed me a pencil and one of the waitress's receipts to add up. I had always been good at arithmetic, thanks to my daddy, so there was nothing to it.

"It comes to one dollar and thirty cents," I told her, adding it in my head.

She opened the cash drawer and pointed. "Suppose a customer gave you two dollars. Can you make change?"

This was easy, seeing as I had sold cotton candy and peanuts from time to time. I made change so quickly and confidently that Ethel was impressed.

"Do you know how to wait tables?" she asked.

"Oh yes, ma'am," I lied. "Of course I do."

"See that fellow in the suit, sitting at the counter? Go on over and take his order. I'll be watching to see how you do."

A dapper-looking man in his late twenties sat all alone at the counter, drumming his fingers and staring down at the menu like he was trying to make up his mind. He was dressed like a city slicker in a plaid double-breasted suit, and he looked out of place among the plainer folks in the diner. I noticed a large square sample-case by his feet and guessed that he was a traveling salesman.

*It's all an act*, I told myself as I took the order pad from Ethel and walked over to him. That's what Aunt Peanut had told me often enough. *"Make people laugh even when you're sad, act entertaining even when your heart is breaking. The show must go on."* I would simply play the part of a waitress.

"Hi, there," I said with a smile. "What can I get for you today, sir?"

My smile was wasted on him. He had his nose stuck in the menu and didn't even notice that I wore the same skirt and blouse I'd worn

for three days instead of a pink-and-white uniform like all the other waitresses. He didn't seem to notice me at all, in fact.

"How's the special tonight?" he asked without looking up.

My confidence teetered and swayed like a dizzy aerialist. I didn't know what a "special" was. I took a deep breath and smiled to push back my tears, then spoke softly so Ethel wouldn't hear me.

"Listen, mister. I don't know anything at all about tonight's special. I'm not even sure I know what you're talking about. I'm new in town and I need a job. That lady over there told me to wait on you and if I do a good job I think she might hire me. Could you please help me out and pick something easy? It would mean a lot to me."

His head jerked up as I spoke and I hoped that Ethel couldn't see the astonished look on his face. It took a moment for him to digest all that I'd said, but when he'd finally sorted it all out he gave me a great big smile.

"Sure thing, doll face," he said. "I'll have the meat loaf dinner with mashed potatoes. Just write number two on the order slip, then take it over to the window behind you and stick it on one of those spikes. The chef will dish it up fast because the meat and potatoes are already cooked. In the meantime," he continued, turning his coffee cup over, "you can pour me a cup of coffee from that pot right over there, and pass me the cream pitcher and the catsup bottle."

"How can I ever thank you?" I said when I returned to fill his cup, my hands shaking.

"Whoa, take it easy, doll face. Pour slowly so you don't spill any. There you go. You're doing just great."

I set the coffeepot back on the hot plate and fetched him the catsup bottle and the cream pitcher, just like he told me to. "Do you think she can tell I'm nervous?" I asked.

"Naw, you've got such a pretty smile on your face...and people don't usually smile if they're nervous. By the way, my name is Harry

Porterfield. What's yours?"

"Eliza Rose Gerard."

"That's a real pretty name, just like your smile. All right, Eliza, turn around like you're watching for my food and you'll see the cook set my plate up there in another minute or two."

I glanced casually over my shoulder just in time to see the sweating, red-faced cook set a plate in the little window between the counter and the kitchen. It had meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans on it. I picked it up with two hands and carefully carried it over to my new friend.

"Now how did you know it would be there?" I asked as I set it in front of him. He laughed.

"I eat here every time I come to Deer Springs on my sales route. Hey, don't look now, doll face, but here comes Ethel. Good luck to you."

She waddled over to me on legs the size of an elephant's. Her shoes looked much too small for her swollen feet. "The job is yours if you want it," she wheezed. "You can start with the breakfast shift tomorrow morning. Be here at five A.M. sharp."

I felt so happy I floated out of the diner on wings, then stood outside for a moment gazing at my new hometown. All kinds of people walked up and down the sidewalks, hurrying in and out of stores, driving past me in wagons and cars—but still, Deer Springs seemed quiet and peaceful compared to the noisy hullabaloo of the circus. When I spotted a bench in front of the train station, I crossed the street to sit down on it. I felt so happy to be "home," I would have been content to sleep right out there on the bench in front of the train station all night.

I was still sitting there, happy as pie, when Harry Porterfield crossed the street and sat down on the bench beside me. "Congratulations, doll face. I heard Ethel say you got the job."

“I’m very grateful for your help, Mr. Porterfield.”

“Hey, call me Harry. And she would have hired you even without my help. A pretty new face like yours will be good for business, don’t you know?” I felt myself blushing. “Say, doll face, you going to sit right here until the diner opens tomorrow morning?”

“I might have to unless there’s a hotel nearby that doesn’t cost too much.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you needed a place to stay? There aren’t any hotels in Deer Springs, but Miss Hansen down on Willow Avenue lets out rooms. That’s where I always bunk. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He picked up his sample case and valise in one hand and my suitcase in the other, then motioned with a tilt of his head for me to follow him.

Miss Hansen was a tall, stringy woman with an unpleasant frown. “I don’t want any hanky-panky in my establishment, Mr. Porterfield,” she said when she saw the two of us. “I appreciate your business, as always, but I won’t be a party to any hanky panky.”

“Why, Miss Hansen! I’m hurt that you would think such a thing of me—let alone think it of this fine young woman here.”

She snorted just like the horse Daddy used to ride in his act. “Humph! What kind of a respectable young woman runs around with a traveling salesman?”

“But I just met Mr. Porterfield in the diner a few minutes ago,” I said in my own defense. “I asked him if he knew of a place to stay.”

Apparently my answer made matters worse. Miss Hansen snorted again. “What kind of a respectable young woman travels all alone without a chaperone?”

They both looked at me, expecting an answer. All I had to do was mention the circus and any doubt about my respectability would fly right out the door—with my suitcase and me flying right out behind it.

“I’m an orphan, ma’am,” I said, looking sad. “My family died in the influenza epidemic and I’ve been living with my maiden aunt ever since. But when she died in a fire a few weeks ago, I just couldn’t bear all the painful memories back home and so I came here to start a new life. I just got a job at the diner. I start tomorrow morning and—”

“That’s true, Miss Hansen,” Harry said. “I ate dinner there tonight and I heard Ethel say the job was hers.”

Miss Hansen reluctantly showed me to my room. I gasped in astonishment when I saw it. “Oh, it’s beautiful! And it’s so big!”

I’d been squeezed like a sardine into a tiny train compartment with my daddy for most of my life, and I’d had even less elbow room in the women’s sleeping car. I couldn’t get over all the wide open space between the bed and the bureau, between the bureau and the door, between the bed and the wall. There was even a pretty little dressing table with a ruffled skirt and a big square mirror that I’d have all to myself. Miss Hansen eyed me very curiously as I gazed around the room as if it were a palace.

“It’s not a big room,” she said. “I have much bigger ones— for couples, you know.”

“This is beautiful. Thank you so much, Miss Hansen.”

She put Harry in a room upstairs and me in a bedroom right next door to her own. I think she stayed awake all night, listening for hanky-panky. My bed was huge and comfortable, but I barely slept. Except for the winter months, this was one of the few times in my life I hadn’t slept on a moving train and I couldn’t get used to the stillness. I missed the comforting clatter of the wheels on the rails, the gentle rocking from side to side. I refused to cry over my treasonous parents, but I did weep for Aunt Peanut—and for Sylvia and Lazlo, and for the Gambrini family, and for Charlie and Zippy, and all the other people in my circus family. But when it was time to get dressed and go to work at the diner the next morning, I dried my eyes and began the

first day of my new life in Deer Springs.

Harry showed up for breakfast around seven-thirty and gave me a boost of confidence right when I needed it. "You're doing great, doll face...and you look like a million dollars in that uniform."

"I never knew there were so many different ways to cook an egg," I told him. "Seems like everyone I've waited on this morning has wanted theirs a different way." I started to say that the circus cooks only knew how to make scrambled eggs, but I caught myself just in time.

"May I treat you to dinner tonight?" Harry asked when I brought him his check. He was a nice-looking man and smartly dressed, but he seemed a bit flabby compared to the well-muscled acrobats and aerialists I'd grown up with. Even the roustabouts and razorbacks had more going for them than poor, pasty-skinned Harry did.

"Thanks, Harry, but I don't think—"

"Please? I know you don't know a soul in this town and I hate the thought of you eating all alone."

I finally agreed, mainly because I didn't know how to refuse. We ate at the diner of course, since it was the only decent place in town. I could tell that Harry was already getting sweet on me when he tried to hold my hand as we walked back to the rooming house. I shook my head and stuck my hands in my pockets. When we reached the front porch he asked me to sit down with him for a few minutes.

"I have to leave on the train tomorrow," he said, "but I'll be back in town in a few weeks. I'd like to see you again, Eliza."

I pondered what to say as I watched a cat run across the street. A little boy sped past on his bicycle. "Let me ask you a question, Harry," I finally said. "Do you like being a traveling salesman?"

"I sure do. It's a great way to travel around and see the country, meet new people....I grew up in a cramped little town like this one, so I was chomping at the bit to get away. This sales job was my golden

opportunity. Why do you ask, doll face?”

“Because all I’ve ever wanted was to have a home and a family and to settle down in a nice little town like Deer Springs.”

“You’re kidding! I’d die of claustrophobia here!”

“Then I guess we don’t have a whole lot in common, do we?” I rose to my feet. “Good night, Harry. And thanks again for dinner.”

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Getting off that train all alone in Deer Springs was about the bravest thing I’ve ever done. It shows you how badly I wanted that kind of a life. I’d learned how to put on a show and tell lies in the circus, where the man-eating tiger was a pussycat, the Abominable Snowman was a moldy old bear, and the clowns painted on their smiles, so I just faked everything I did. After handling a chainsmoking chimpanzee, unruly customers didn’t bother me much. Lazlo had taught me to juggle four balls by the time I was ten years old, so getting the hang of waiting on a half-dozen tables seemed easy after that. Charlie the clown had his heart broken when Veronica ran off with an acrobat, but he still made the audience laugh. And Bianca’s nerves went all to pieces after Carlo had his accident on the high wire, but the show still went on. That’s how I nerved myself for everything I did—getting off the train, walking into the diner and asking for a job—and taking up with Sam Wyatt.

Sam came into the diner all the time, usually for breakfast, sometimes for supper, and once in a while for all three meals. He always sat hunched in a booth by himself with an invisible cloud of sadness all around him that looked as though it might rain all over you if you got too close. He was about three or four years older than me, and I guessed by his bib overalls, his muscular build, and his deeply tanned skin that he was probably a hired hand on one of the neighboring farms—except it was a mystery to me how a farmhand

could afford to eat in a diner all the time.

Sam was so handsome it was all I could do to keep from staring at him whenever he came in. His solemn face and square jaw had a lot of character, and he had the fairest hair and bluest eyes I'd ever seen. I smiled and tried to be friendly whenever I waited on him, but he held me at arm's length without ever moving a muscle. He rarely looked up, and when he did he never made eye contact. In fact, he never spoke one word more than he had to in order to get his food and pay his check. He acted as though he didn't want anyone to notice him, like he wanted to blend into the booth and disappear.

"Who is he?" I finally asked another waitress named Debbie. "I've noticed he comes in here a lot."

Debbie pulled me aside into the kitchen as if it were dangerous to be caught talking about him out loud. "That's Sam Wyatt," she whispered. "He went to school here in Deer Springs with my older brothers. They always said he was a little...strange. All the Wyatts are."

"Strange? How so?"

"You know, kind of quiet...mysterious. Sam never used to hang around much with the other kids, only with his older brother, Matthew."

"Doesn't he have a wife or a mother to feed him?"

"Sam's not married!" Debbie reacted as if the idea was outrageous. "He runs Wyatt Orchards with his father. There's just the two of them there now, since his mother died. His two brothers are both gone, too. I don't know who's feeding his father, but Sam comes in here every couple of days to get a decent meal."

"Where did you say he lives?"

Debbie's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You haven't heard of Wyatt Orchards? It's the biggest spread in the county. If you take Spruce Road straight out of town for about two or three miles, you can't miss



it.”

I went for a walk down Spruce Road the following Sunday afternoon on my day off, determined to find out where the mysterious Sam Wyatt lived. Debbie was right—you couldn’t miss the huge sign painted on the side of the barn: *Wyatt Orchards—Frank Wyatt & Sons, Proprietors*. I didn’t care a fig about the orchard, but I took one look at that beautiful house with the wide front porch and the dark green shutters and the big oak trees all around it and I knew that I’d found the home I’d longed for all my life. I had to live there. I would live there. All I needed to do was win Sam Wyatt’s heart.

With only three churches in town, it wasn’t hard to find out which one he attended. I went up to him after the service the following Sunday morning, acting like his long-lost friend.

“Well, hey there...remember me? I wait on you at the diner sometimes. My name’s Eliza Rose. What’s yours?”

“Sam,” he said, staring at the floor. “Sam Wyatt.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Sam.” I stuck out my hand and he had no choice but to shake it. He turned as red as my daddy’s nose, then excused himself and hurried away the first chance he got.

Breaking through all the barriers Sam had built up was one of the hardest things I’d ever done. It took me more than six months to do it, too. I felt like I was walking the high wire, trying to keep my balance between being too friendly and not friendly enough, and I knew that one little mistake might send me tumbling. But I just kept a picture of that beautiful house in my mind and thought about it every time Sam brushed me aside. I kept working on him, kept smiling and acting friendly in the diner and throwing myself in his path at church. It was like taming a skittish animal, first getting him used to me, then winning his trust and confidence, until finally he was eating out of my hand.

When Sam came into the diner for supper one Friday night I

gathered up all my nerve to take the next step. “Hey, Sam, how come I never see you at the picture show?” I leaned on his table so our faces were real close. “Don’t you ever go?”

He glanced up at me, then looked away. “Um...no.”

“Oh, you should go sometime! There’s a real exciting Tarzan serial playing right now, in fact. And I’ll bet you’d like Lillian Gish’s movies, too. All the fellows like Lillian Gish. I’m going to the seven-thirty show tonight. Why don’t you meet me there and find out what you’re missing?”

He was silent for such a long time I thought sure he’d refuse, but he finally looked up and said, “All right.”

I was surprised, but very pleased. We met outside the Ritz, and we each bought our own tickets and popcorn that first time. But afterward Sam said he’d enjoyed the picture show very much and that he’d like to go again sometime. That gave me the courage to take the next step.

“Say, Sam, would you mind walking me home? I get spooked sometimes, walking all alone in the dark. It’s not far. I’m staying at Miss Hansen’s rooming house over on Willow.”

He agreed, and it seemed to me that he stood up a little bit taller at the idea of protecting me. I took advantage of our time together to get him talking about his orchard.

“What kind of work do you do, Sam?”

“I run an orchard with my father.”

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“I’ve never thought about it,” he said with a shrug. “Farming is all I know. What else would I do?”

At first, talking to Sam was like trying to pump a dry well. But as slowly as the changing seasons, Sam finally started loosening up. Pretty soon he was watching me in the diner instead of gazing down at the tabletop. Then I noticed him staring across the aisle at me in

church instead of at his hymnal. He had that moonstruck look about him, and I could feel his eyes on me like two beams of light. One night I kissed him in the dark in the movie theater. Rudolf Valentino was kissing his leading lady, so I just turned to Sam, took his freshly-shaven face in my hands, and kissed him. Sam must have liked it a lot because he didn't wait for me to make the first move after that.

But I wasn't the only one who'd noticed Sam's growing interest in me. Frank Wyatt descended on Sam and me as we stood talking together after church one day and it was just like the plague of darkness the Bible always talks about. One minute Sam and I were laughing and the next minute Frank seemed to blot out the sun.

From the very first time I met Sam's father he scared me to death. He seemed like such a cold, heartless man—and my opinion of him didn't change once I got to know him, either. On the very first Sunday he met me he started giving me the third degree— who was I, and where did I come from, and what was I doing in Deer Springs? I knew I could never tell him the truth.

"My family died in the influenza epidemic, Mr. Wyatt."

"You say your name's 'Gerard'? What kind of a name is that?"

"French, I think. My daddy was born in New Orleans."

"New Orleans! What kind of work did your father do there?"

I pictured my daddy in whiteface with his red wig and bulbous nose and gigantic shoes, and tears sprang to my eyes. I told myself I was crying because I was scared of Frank, not because I missed my daddy. Sam saw my tears and mistook my reaction for grief.

"It's still hard for Eliza to talk about her family," he told his father. He pulled a bandana handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me as he steered me away from Frank. "I'm sorry about my father," he whispered.

"I don't think he likes me."

"He doesn't like anybody, Eliza. He acts that way with everyone."

I knew Frank Wyatt wasn't satisfied with the way I'd answered his questions, so I began embroidering my lies, thinking up a respectable profession for my daddy and rehearsing all the details about where Daddy was educated and where we used to live so I'd be ready the next time Frank questioned me. I didn't want to ruin my chances to live in that beautiful house by the orchard.

By this time Sam was calling on me regularly at the rooming house. He told me later that he was drawn to me because I was so mysterious and exotic, and I seemed to have a knowledge of the world that he didn't have. I liked Sam, but I never really got to know him very well. Every time I looked into his blue eyes I saw a lot of sorrow and pain in them. Even after all the time we spent together, I still had no idea who he really was or what caused the sadness. In many ways, Sam remained a stranger to me, and since I was lying through my teeth about who I was, I guess I was a stranger to him, too.

After we went out together regularly for about three months and kissed all the time in the movie theater, I decided to take our courtship to the next stage. But just like that first kiss, I knew I'd have to make the first move.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," I said one night as we cuddled on Miss Hansen's porch swing. Even in the dark I saw the surprise in his eyes.

"You love...me?"

"Yes," I lied. "Why does that surprise you so much?"

"You're pretty as a picture, Eliza. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to have such a pretty girl fall for me."

"Well...? Do you love me, too, Sam Wyatt?"

He looked me right in the eyes and I saw the truth even before he said it. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I do. More than I know how to say."

I can't tell you how guilty his confession made me feel. I'd coaxed

him and tamed him and wormed my way into his life over the last several months until he'd lost his heart completely to me. I was probably the only person who had ever told Sam they loved him and it was all an act on my part. I liked Sam, I felt sorry for him, but I wasn't in love with him. Still, I pushed the guilt aside and said, "You know what, Sam? I'd marry you in a heartbeat if you asked me to."

He appeared stunned. "My father would never give us his permission."

I nuzzled his ear. "Aren't you old enough to make up your own mind?"

"Yes, but..."

"Well, I don't mind eloping. What could your father do about it after the fact?"

"I don't know." He released me and his arms fell to his lap as he leaned back against the swing. "I don't know," he repeated.

Sam was terrified of his father. I could see it, plain as day. I would have to do something to take his mind off his fear. I gave him a few days to think about the idea of marriage because I'd learned that Sam liked to think things through before he acted. Then, as we cuddled on the porch a week later, I tried again.

"I love you, Sam," I whispered. "If we were married we wouldn't have to say good-night when Miss Hansen turns off the porch lights. We could keep right on kissing all night, just like this..." I took his face in my hands and gave him the steamiest kiss he'd ever had in his life. After that, all thoughts of his father went up in smoke.

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Eloping with me was the only act of rebellion in Sam's entire life. We honeymooned in a hotel room across the state line, and I don't think he worried about his father even once that night. But the next day... !

The next day Sam was shaking in his boots when he took me home. He was a big man, every bit as big and as strong as his father, but we both had jelly knees as we walked into the farmhouse kitchen that morning.

“Where have you been all night?” Frank demanded. If looks could kill, the sheriff would have arrested Frank for murdering us both.

“Eliza and I drove over the state line to see a justice of the peace last night,” Sam said shakily. “We’re married.”

“You’re *married*? To this...This *tramp*?”

“I love her.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do!” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “Nevertheless, you’re going straight to John Wakefield, and we’ll just see about having this foolish little blunder annulled. I won’t have her in my house.”

“No,” Sam said quietly. “No, I won’t have our marriage annulled.” He wrapped his brawny arm around my waist and pulled me close. “Eliza is my wife and I love her. If you can’t accept that...Then we’ll both have to leave.”

Sam and Frank stared at each other for a long, long time. I didn’t realize until after I’d lived with Frank Wyatt for a few years what an incredibly brave thing Sam had done. When he took a stand against his father that morning, he risked losing everything he had—for my sake. I also didn’t realize at the time what a rare thing it was for Frank to back down and give in to his son. But he did.

“All right, but I promise you this,” Frank said, waving his finger in Sam’s face. “I’ll be counting carefully for the next nine months, and if she produces a baby one day before that time, I’ll toss both her and the kid out in the gutter where they belong.”

Thankfully, Jimmy was born one week after our first anniversary.

Except for the hateful stares of my father-in-law, I was very content in my marriage. I had the home I’d always longed for—even if it did

include Frank Wyatt. From the very first time I stepped foot in Sam's house, I knew I never wanted to live anywhere else. It's not that everything was fancy and new—it wasn't. The wallpaper was faded, and there were worn spots in the carpet, and the wooden stairs creaked when you climbed them, but that was exactly what I loved about it. All my life I'd lacked a history and permanence, but I saw both of those things in every object in the house. I made up stories about all the people who'd lived here before me and the history of the furnishings they'd left behind. I didn't want to change a single thing. Every night as I would lay in Sam's arms and hear the train whistle in the distance beyond the orchard, I'd remember the loneliness and longing I'd felt all my life and I'd wonder if the people on that train were gazing at my farmhouse and wishing they were me.

The first winter Sam and I were married I sent a note to Aunt Peanut at the circus' winter address in Georgia.

*Dear Aunt Peanut,*

*I just wanted to let you know I'm alive and well and very happy. I'm married to a really nice man and I live in a beautiful house in the country. Tell Charlie and the Gambrini family and everyone else I said "Hi."*

*Love,*

*Eliza*

I didn't put a return address on it, and I mailed it from a town ten miles away from Deer Springs when I went there to see the doctor. I'd learned I was expecting Jimmy, and for some unknown reason Frank Wyatt had forbidden me to see Dr. Gilbert in Deer Springs.

Sam looked scared half to death when I told him he was going to be a father. "What's the matter, Sam? Don't you want kids?" I asked.

"No...I don't know. I guess I never thought...No."

"But why not? What are you afraid of?"

He didn't answer. The pain in Sam's eyes was so sharp I ached for him. I wished that I loved him the way he loved me because maybe then I could take away all the sorrow he had stored up inside himself. Sam finally walked out of our bedroom and out into the night, and he was gone for a long, long time. He was real tender with me while I was pregnant, though, like he thought he might hurt the baby if he hugged me too hard.

When my time came, Frank made Sam drive all the way to the neighboring town in the middle of the night to fetch a doctor. Through all my long hours of labor I kept thinking about my own mama, about how she had abandoned me, and I realized that I was as scared about having this baby as Sam was. When the doctor finally laid little Jimmy in my arms I cried, overwhelmed by the measureless love I felt for him. Yet at the same time I shuddered in fear at the thought that I might hurt him, lie to him, maybe even abandon him like my mama had abandoned me. It was terrifying to love someone so very much.

"What's the matter?" Sam asked when he saw me weeping over Jimmy that first night.

"I guess I'm scared, too," I admitted. "Being a mother is hard for me because I grew up without one."

Sam sat down on the bed beside me, a puzzled look on his face. "But I thought you said your whole family died in the influenza epidemic?"

He'd caught me in a lie! I panicked. "Um...no...That was my step-mother," I said quickly. "And she was never much of a mother to me." I needed to change the subject, fast. I lifted Jimmy and handed him to Sam before he could protest. "Here...you hold him."

Jimmy squirmed, then settled into his father's strong arms. He was awake, and he looked up at Sam as if memorizing his face. Sam's eyes filled with tears. "My goodness...my goodness..." he whispered. "He's



so small. And I don't know how to be a good father. I'm so afraid I'll..."

I'd lived with Frank Wyatt long enough by then to understand why Sam was so scared. I thought of the advice Aunt Peanut had once given my father.

"You don't have to be scared, Sam," I told him. "Just be the daddy you always wished you'd had. If you wished your daddy had tucked you into bed at night, then tuck little Jimmy in. If you wished your daddy had taken you fishing, then take him fishing. That's all you have to do."

"Really?" he whispered.

"Yes. That's all there is to it."

From the day the children were born, Sam loved each of them with his whole heart. He never said the words out loud, probably because he'd never heard them from his own father and didn't know how, but I could see how much he loved them. If he lost patience with one of them he'd quietly walk away rather than lose his temper, and I admired him for that. He never once laid a hand on any of them in anger. When Becky Jean was born he just stared and stared at her with tears rolling down his cheeks. "A girl...a beautiful little girl!" he murmured. "She doesn't look real, Eliza. She looks like...like a little angel laying there!"

I felt the same love and fear that Sam did. I would go into my kids' rooms at night and watch them sleep, marveling at the fact that my children were part of me, yet they weren't. It terrified me to know how much they needed me, depended on me. I was so afraid that I'd disappoint them, maybe even fail them. Sometimes I'd remember how my daddy used to look at me with fear in his eyes and I wondered if it was for that very same reason.

Once, I came real close to telling Sam the truth about my past.

Jimmy had just turned four and Luke was two when I learned that a

competitor's circus was coming to the county fairgrounds. I was so excited to think that Sam and I could sit in the bleachers together watching the circus with our two boys—just like all the families I used to envy. I'd planned to wait until I was curled up beside Sam in bed at night, then tell him how this would all be a dream come true for me. But before I had a chance to confess, an advance man for the circus came through Deer Springs and knocked on our kitchen door just as we sat down to lunch.

"Good afternoon, folks. I'm with the Gentry Brothers' Circus and we'll be performing over at the county fairgrounds next month. I'd like to offer some free passes for your entire family if you'll let us post a bill on your barn out there."

Frank flew into a terrible rage, bellowing about how circus performers strutted around with hardly any clothes on, how they all lived such immoral lifestyles, and how disgraceful it was for Christian people to even consider attending a circus. He yelled so loud he made little Luke cry. I watched my father-in-law toss that poor man out on his ear and I knew that I could never breathe one word about growing up in the circus. Nor would my children ever get the chance to see one as long as their grandfather was alive.

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My husband worked his entire life to please his father—an impossible task since Frank Wyatt was impossible to please. Sam never really did feel his father's love or approval, even as he lay dying. And he never should have gotten sick in the first place.

It started out as just a simple cut on his foot—a nail or something that had poked through the worn-out sole of his boot and sliced into him. His foot hurt him, but he kept right on working, limping around the barn as he shoveled out manure and milked the cows.

"Guess I need a new pair of boots," he said that night, showing me

the hole in his sole. I doctored the cut on his foot but neither one of us thought much about it. It was September, a busy time of year in the orchard, and Sam kept on limping around, wearing those same boots because there wasn't any time to run into Deer Springs for a new pair.

A few days later he woke up with a low-grade fever. He complained of a stiff jaw and sore neck, and said he ached all over. We both thought he had the flu. I could tell Sam felt miserable, but he dragged himself outside to do a full day's work, fever or no fever, because his father expected him to. He got worse and worse.

One night Sam's moaning woke me up. His fever wasn't all that high but he was sweating so much he'd soaked all the bed sheets. His heart raced a mile a minute.

"Sam, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

He couldn't answer. The muscles in his neck and jaw went into such a horrible spasm that it distorted his face and froze his jaw. I leaped out of bed and began to dress. "I'm going for the doctor."

"No..." he moaned.

"Why not? Sam, I'm scared! What if...?" It terrified me to think that it might be lockjaw, but I didn't want to say it out loud and upset Sam. "Listen, if I go get Dr. Gilbert in Deer Springs I can be back in half an hour."

"My father...won't allow..." he finally managed to say.

I didn't know what to do. All my instincts urged me to go get help but every time I mentioned going for the doctor it seemed to upset Sam even more.

He was no better in the morning. As soon as I heard my father-in-law stirring I ran downstairs to confront him.

"Where's my breakfast?" Frank asked when he saw me. "And where's Sam?"

"He can't get out of bed." My voice shook with fear. "He's sick—terribly, horribly sick. He needs a doctor."

“Sick! The cows have to be milked! And I need him in the orchard!” He glared at me as if Sam’s illness was all my fault.

“He can’t work. Go upstairs and see for yourself.”

Frank grunted in disgust as if I was a silly, hysterical woman, then turned away. “He’s a strong boy. He’ll be fine in a day or two.”

“He’s not fine!” I yelled. “Go look at him! You have to send for a doctor!”

Frank’s eyes flashed in anger as he whirled around, wagging his finger in my face. “Don’t you *ever* tell me what to do!” He slammed the kitchen door on his way out.

I had my own chores to finish and meals to fix and kids to tend to, but every time I checked on Sam that day his condition was worse. The muscle spasms spread to his abdomen and legs and back, and they were so violent and so painful that his body went stiff as a board and his back arched clear off the bed. Sam was awake and alert—and in agony.

I watched for my father-in-law all afternoon, planning to confront him again the moment I saw him, but he stayed out in the orchard all day and didn’t come back to the house until suppertime. I would have loaded up the kids and gone for help long before I did but Frank had the team of horses with him, and I didn’t know how to drive the truck.

I waited until Frank said grace at supper time, then told him as calmly as I could, “Sam needs a doctor. I...I think he has lockjaw.”

Frank reached for the mashed potatoes without even looking up at me. “I suppose you’re a medical expert now?”

“No...but it doesn’t take an expert to see how sick he is.” I’d promised myself I wouldn’t cry but I couldn’t stop my tears. “Please, Mr. Wyatt, he’s in so much pain. I can’t stand to watch him suffering.”

Frank continued to eat in silence.

“Please,” I begged. “Please let me drive into town and fetch the doctor.”

He raised his head and his voice. "You will not touch my truck or my horses! My son does not need a doctor!"

I knew then what I had to do. As soon as I'd tucked my kids in bed that night, I quietly left the house through the front door and ran all the way into Deer Springs. I was so distraught, shaking from head to toe with exhaustion and rage and fear, that it took me several minutes to convince Dr. Gilbert that I wasn't the one who needed medical care.

"No, please, Dr. Gilbert. It's my husband, Sam, who needs your help, not me."

"Sam Wyatt?"

"Yes. I think he has lockjaw. I think he's dying. *Please come.*"

He asked me to describe Sam's symptoms and I knew by the grim look on his face as I told him, that I had cause for concern. He opened his cupboard and began packing things into his medical bag as he questioned me.

"Does Frank Wyatt know you're here?" he asked me when he'd finished.

"No. He refused to let me get help. I had to walk all the way here. He wouldn't even go upstairs and see how sick Sam was."

Dr. Gilbert shook his head. His clamped lips and angry eyes told me that he was furious. "Frank may not let me through the door, you know."

"You have to try, Dr. Gilbert. Please don't let Sam die!" I was nearly hysterical.

He gripped my shoulders, and his firm hold reassured me. "I'll do my best, Mrs. Wyatt. Listen, perhaps you should have some brandy before we go."

"I'll be fine. Just hurry."

It took no time at all to drive there in Dr. Gilbert's car. I convinced him to park on the road so my father-in-law wouldn't hear us, and we walked up the driveway in the dark. Frank's bedroom was right off the

kitchen, so I sneaked Dr. Gilbert in through the front door and hurried him up the stairs.

Sam looked even worse than when I'd left him. He turned to us as we came into the bedroom and I saw the panic in his eyes, then his back arched horribly. "Help me!" he slurred as his jaw locked in a grimace of pain.

Dr. Gilbert examined him gently, but the slightest touch sent Sam's muscles into violent spasms. I stood beside the bed, wringing my hands, then nearly jumped out of my skin when I suddenly heard Frank's booming voice behind me.

"What are you doing in my house, Gilbert?"

Dr. Gilbert slowly turned to face him. "I'm treating your son—"

"No, you're not! We don't need you here! Get out!"

"Frank, your son has tetanus," he said quietly. "He's very ill. I'm going to give him an injection of antitoxin and—"

My scream interrupted him. Sam had started going into convulsions. His skin turned a horrible bluish gray as he struggled to breathe.

"He's having a seizure," Dr. Gilbert said. "It's cutting off his oxygen." He grasped Sam's shoulders to hold him down.

I'd never felt so scared or so helpless in my life. When the seizure finally ended, Dr. Gilbert quickly prepared a hypodermic needle.

"I'm going to give you some tetanus antitoxin, Sam. Then something to help relax your muscles."

I glanced over my shoulder, worried that Frank would try to stop him, but my father-in-law had left the room.

Dr. Gilbert did everything he could for Sam that night. He even showed me how to make a poultice and apply it to the cut on Sam's foot. But I could tell by the way the doctor gripped my shoulders again to steady me when it was time for him to leave, that he was just as worried about Sam as I was.

"I have to be honest with you, Mrs. Wyatt, and tell you that your

husband is a very sick man. Tetanus antitoxin is most effective when it's given as soon as the symptoms appear, but...well, that decision was taken out of our hands.” He sighed, then picked up his medical bag. “I’ll be back first thing in the morning.”

My husband’s illness was too far gone for the antitoxin to work. Dr. Gilbert couldn’t do a thing for him and neither could I. Sam died a horrible, painful death as the seizures finally became so violent he stopped breathing. Yet he was awake and aware of everything that was happening to him until the very end. The last words he heard me say were, “I love you, Sam.”

The day he died I was so distraught I raged at my father-in-law in front of my kids. “It’s all your fault!” I screamed. “Sam died because you wouldn’t go for help! You killed your own son! If you had gone for a doctor sooner and Sam had gotten the antitoxin, he never would have died!”

Frank didn’t respond to my outburst. He stared right through me with haunted eyes, and I had to wonder if he’d even heard a word I’d said. The hateful, manipulative Frank Wyatt I’d lived with these past years died with his son, leaving a broken, embittered old man in his place. What good was his orchard and everything he’d built without a son to inherit it? Still, I didn’t feel one shred of pity for Frank. He’d reaped what he’d sown.

My father-in-law had hardly seemed to notice my kids before Sam died. I always figured he hated them because he hated me. But as he stood beside the graves of his wife and two sons he slowly looked up and saw Jimmy and Luke clinging to me, their faces pale with grief. He looked at his grandsons, really looked at them, for the very first time and I think he suddenly realized they were all he had left.

“Oh, dear God...” he whispered.

Frank seemed different after Sam died—not any kinder, and certainly not any warmer or more loving toward me or the kids. But

he was a broken man, and he and I both knew it. We lived together like strangers in a boardinghouse, rarely talking, seeing each other only at mealtimes.

Then one cold November day a year later, Jimmy found his grandfather sprawled on the floor of the barn. I hurried outside when I heard my son's frantic yells, but the moment I looked into the cold, vacant eyes of the man I'd hated, I knew he was dead. I didn't feel one bit sorry. In fact, I found myself wishing he had suffered twice as much as poor Sam had suffered. I was about to turn my back on him when I noticed that Frank's hands were empty. They lay open, palms up, and there was nothing in them. He had grasped and controlled and manipulated with those hands all his life to get his own way, and now they were empty. Frank Wyatt's orchard and everything he had worked for had been left behind for someone else.



## ~ Hoofstuk agtien ~

Ek dink ek het diep in my binneste altyd die waarheid geken – dat my ma nie dood is nie, maar my soos ’n ongewenste werpsels katjies langs die pad gelos het. Ek wou nie die waarheid hoor nie. Om te erken wat ek uiteindelik gedwing is om te aanvaar, sou beteken dat ek ook die hoekom daarvan moes aanvaar: Hoekom het sy my verlaat? Wat is fout met my wat gemaak het dat sy haar rug op my gedraai en weggestap het toe ek net vier jaar oud was?

Toe ek daardie lang, eensame middag by die trein se venster uitstaar, is ek vasbeslote om die verlede vir altyd agter my te sit. Ek sal ’n nuwe lewe begin en nooit terugkyk nie. Ek oortuig myself ek is net soos die dapper heldinne in Betsy Gibson se boeke. Hulle is dikwels wees gelaat en moet die wêreld op hulle eie trotseer, maar ek het ’n groot voordeel bo hulle, want ek het baie ervaring van die lewe aangesien ek saam met die sirkus gereis het. Ek is nie eens ’n klein bietjie bang om per trein deur ’n onbekende land te reis nie. Ek kan ook nie terugverlang na ’n huis wat ek nog nooit gehad het nie. Ek ken nie die naam van die dorpie waarna ek soek nie, maar ek is seker ek sal dit herken sodra ek dit sien.

Ek soek daardie hele eerste middag sonder enige geluk, en dan slaap ek daardie nag op die trein; die beweging sus my aan die slaap soos vir die grootste deel van my lewe. Ek kyk die hele volgende dag ook by die venster uit. Laat op die middag van die derde dag begin ons uiteindelik deur klein dorpies ry soos dié waarvan ek al vir jare droom. Tussen die dorpies is plase met vrugteboorde en omheinde weivelde met melkkoeie. Ek sien bome waarin my kinders eendag kan klim en lanings waar ek op Sondagmiddae kan gaan stap saam met die man wat ek liefhet.

Toe die trein in Deer Springs aankom, gryp ek my tas en klim af. Ek vind later uit dat die passasierstrein net twee keer per week hier stop – op Dinsdae en Donderdae – daarom is dit regtig my gelukkige dag om op een van die min treine te wees wat wel stop. Die klein dorpie lyk perfek, selfs nog voordat ek die “Hulp nodig”-bordjie in die restaurant oorkant die stasie se venster sien.

Ek mors geen tyd nie; stap dadelik oor die straat en by die restaurant in. Ek stap reguit na die vrou wat by die kasregister sit, ek het later gehoor haar naam is Ethel Peterson, en sê: “Ek sien daar is ’n bordjie in die venster wat sê julle soek hulp.”

Ethel is byna net so groot soos Gloria die vet vrou; daarom het ek daarop

gereken dat sy net so vriendelik ook sal wees. Sy kyk egter agterdogtig na my. “Wel, dit hang af,” sê sy. “Wie is jy?”

“My naam is Eliza Rose Gerard, Mevrou, en ek het pas na julle dorp verhuis. Ek soek werk.”

“Het jy familie hier in Deer Springs?”

Dit is toe die gejjokkery begin. Ek weet as ek die waarheid vertel dat ek in ’n sirkus grootgeword het, sal ek gebrandmerk word as ’n wilde vrou met losse sedes, want dit is die reputasie wat sirkusmense het. As ek die mense moet vertel dat my pa ’n nar en my ma ’n dronklap is, sal ek nooit die kans kry op die eerbare lewe waarvan ek nog altyd droom nie. Ek besluit om te jok – en wanneer ’n mens eers begin jok, kan jy natuurlik nooit ophou nie.

“Ek het geen familie nie,” sê ek met ’n jammerlike stem. “My mamma, pappa en twee susters is almal verlede herfs in die griep epidemie dood. Ek is self ook byna dood. Ek het besluit om te trek en iewers anders ’n nuwe lewe te begin, want die herinneringe is net te pynlik om te verduur. Ek het regtig die werk nodig, Mevrou, indien jy steeds op soek is na iemand.”

Ek weet ek moet vinnig die onderwerp verander voordat sy die kans kry om te vra waarvandaan ek kom. Dit is gelukkig naby aan etenstyd en die restaurant is vinnig besig om vol te word; Ethel het dus nie baie tyd om my te ondervra nie.

“Hoe goed is jy met rekenkunde?” Sy gee vir my ’n potlood en een van die kelnerinne se strokies om op te tel. Te danke aan my pa was ek nog altyd goed met rekenkunde; dus vind ek dit maklik.

“Dit is een dollar en dertig sent,” sê ek vir haar nadat ek dit in my kop opgetel het.

Sy maak die kasregister se laai oop en wys daarna. “Sê nou ’n klant gee vir jou twee dollar. Kan jy vir hom kleingeld uithaal?”

Dit is maklik, aangesien ek van tyd tot tyd spookasem en grondboontjies verkoop het. Ek tel die kleingeld so vinnig uit dat Ethel beïndruk is.

“Weet jy hoe om tafels te bedien?” vra sy.

“O ja, Mevrou,” jok ek. “Natuurlik weet ek.”

“Sien jy die man met die pak klere aan wat daar by die toonbank sit? Gaan na hom toe en vat sy bestelling. Ek sal hier sit en kyk om te sien hoe jy vaar.”

’n Netjiese man in sy laat-twintigs sit alleen by die toonbank. Hy trommel met sy vingers op die blad en staar na die spyskaart asof hy ’n besluit probeer neem. Met sy dubbelborsbaadjie aan lyk hy soos ’n regte windmakerige stadsjapie en hy lyk sommer uit plek tussen die ander mense in die restaurant. Ek sien ’n groot, vierkantige monsterkis by sy voete en raai dat hy ’n reisende verkoopsman is.

*Dit is alles toneelspel, sê ek vir myself toe ek die bestelboekie by Ethel vat en na hom toe loop. Dit is wat tannie Peanut gereeld vir my gesê het. “Laat mense lag selfs wanneer jy hartseer is; vermaak hulle selfs wanneer dit voel of jou hart gaan breek. Die vertoning moet voortgaan.”* Ek sal doodeenvoudig die rol van ’n kelnerin vertolk.

“Hallo daar,” sê ek glimlaggend. “Wat kan ek vandag vir jou bring, Meneer?”

Ek mors my glimlag op hom. Hy sit met sy neus in die spyskaart en sien nie eers ek het nog dieselfde romp en bloes as drie dae gelede aan in plaas van die pienk-en-wit uniform soos die ander kelnerinne nie. Om die waarheid te sê, dit lyk of hy my glad nie raaksien nie.

“Wat is vanaand se spesiale aanbieding?” vra hy sonder om op te kyk.

My vertroue wankel soos ’n akrobaat wat duiselig is. Ek weet nie wat die “spesiale aanbieding” is nie. Ek trek my asem diep in en glimlag om my trane te keer, dan praat ek so sag dat Ethel my nie moet hoor nie.

“Luister, Meneer. Ek weet net mooi niks van vanaand se spesiale aanbieding af nie. Ek is nie eens seker of ek weet waarvan jy praat nie. Ek is nuut in die dorp en ek het ’n werk nodig. Die vrou daar oorkant het gesê ek moet jou bestelling neem en as ek dit goed doen, sal sy my dalk in diens neem. Kan jy my asseblief help en iets makliks kies? Dit sal vir my baie beteken.”

Hy kyk skerp op terwyl ek praat en ek hoop Ethel kan nie die verbaasde uitdrukking op sy gesig sien nie. Dit neem hom ’n oomblik om alles in te neem wat ek gesê het, maar toe hy uiteindelik besef waarom dit gaan, glimlag hy breed vir my.

“Natuurlik, pop,” sê hy. “Ek sal die vleisbrood met kapokaartappels neem. Skryf net nommer twee op die bestelstrokie, vat dit dan daar na die venster agter jou toe en steek dit deur een van daardie spykers. Die sjef sal dit vinnig opdien, want die vleis en aartappels is reeds gaar. Intussen,” gaan hy voort en draai sy leë koffiebeker om, “kan jy vir my koffie ingooi met daardie pot en dan vir my die melkbeker en die bottel tamatiesous bring.”

“Hoe kan ek jou ooit bedank?” sê ek toe ek terugkeer om sy beker met bewende hande vol te maak.

“Hokaai, pop! Gooi stadig sodat jy nie mors nie. Daar’s hy. Jy doen goed.”

Ek sit die koffiepote terug op die warmplaat en gaan haal dan die bottel tamatiesous en melkbeker, net soos hy gesê het ek moet. “Dink jy sy kan sien ek is senuweeagtig?” vra ek.

“Nee wat, jy het ’n mooi glimlag op jou gesig ... en mense glimlag gewoonlik nie as hulle senuweeagtig is nie. Terloops, my naam is Harry

Porterfield. Wat is jou naam?"

"Eliza Rose Gerard."

"Dit is 'n baie mooi naam, net soos jou glimlag. Nou goed, Eliza, draai om asof jy uitkyk vir my kos en jy sal sien die kok gaan binne 'n minuut of twee my bord daar neersit."

Ek kyk gemaklik oor my skouer net om te sien hoe die natgeswete, rooigesig kok 'n bord in die klein venstertjie tussen die toonbank en die kombuis neersit. Daar is vleisbrood, kapokaartappels en groenbone op die bord. Ek tel dit met twee hande op en vat dit versigtig vir my nuwe vriend.

"Hoe het jy geweet dit sal daar wees?" vra ek toe ek die bord voor hom neersit. Hy lag.

"Ek eet altyd hier wanneer ek op my verkoopsroete deur Deer Springs reis. Hei, moenie nou kyk nie, pop, maar hier kom Ethel. Sterkte vir jou."

Sy waggel na my toe met bene so groot soos 'n olifant s'n. Haar skoene lyk heeltemal te klein vir haar geswelde voete. "Die werk is joune as jy dit wil hê," blaas sy. "Jy kan môreoggend met die ontbytshok begin. Wees stiptelik om vyfuur hier."

Ek voel so gelukkig dat ek asof met vlerke by die restaurant uit sweef. Dan gaan staan ek buite om vir 'n oomblik na my nuwe tuisdorp te kyk. Allerhande soorte mense stap op die sypaadje verby, haastig by winkels in en uit, ry verby my met waens en motors; tog lyk Deer Springs steeds stil en rustig in vergelyking met die sirkus se lawaaierige bedrywigheid. Toe ek 'n bankie voor die stasie sien, stap ek oor die straat en gaan sit daarop. Ek voel so gelukkig om "tuis" te wees dat ek tevrede sal wees om die hele nag net hier op die bankie voor die stasie te slaap.

Ek sit nog steeds daar, so gelukkig as kan kom, toe Harry Porterfield die straat oorsteek en langs my kom sit. "Geluk, pop. Ek het Ethel hoor sê dat jy die werk gekry het."

"Ek is baie dankbaar vir jou hulp, meneer Porterfield."

"Hei, noem my Harry. Sy sou jou aangestel het sonder my hulp. 'n Nuwe mooi gesiggie soos joune sal goed wees vir besigheid." Ek voel hoe ek bloos. "Sê my, pop, gaan jy nou net hier bly sit totdat die restaurant môreoggend oopmaak?"

"Ek sal dalk moet, tensy daar 'n hotel hier naby is wat nie te veel kos nie."

"Hoekom sê jy nie net vir my jy het blyplek nodig nie? Daar is geen hotelle in Deer Springs nie, maar mevrou Hansen in Wilsonlaan verhuur kamers uit. Dit is waar ek altyd oorslaap. Kom, dan gaan wys ek jou."

Hy tel sy monstertas en reissak in die een hand op en my tas in die ander. Dan beduie hy met sy kop dat ek hom moet volg.

Mevrou Hansen is 'n lang, maer vrou met 'n onaangename frons. "Ek sal geen verdagte aktiwiteite in my losieshuis duld nie, meneer Porterfield," sê sy toe sy die twee van ons sien. "Ek waardeer jou besigheid, soos altyd, maar ek sal glad nie 'n gekafoefel onder my dak toelaat nie."

"Hoe so, mevrou Hansen? Ek voel seergemaak dat jy so iets van my sal dink, wat nog te sê van hierdie jong vrou."

Sy snork net soos die perd waarop Pappa altyd in sy vertoning ry. "Hm! Watter soort eerbare jong vrou loop saam met 'n reisende verkoopsman rond?"

"Ek het meneer Porterfield maar net 'n paar minute gelede by die restaurant ontmoet," sê ek tot my eie verdediging. "Ek het hom gevra of hy van 'n plek weet waar ek kan bly."

My antwoord maak dinge klaarblyklik erger. Juffrou Hansen snork weer. "Watter soort eerbare jong vrou reis alleen?"

Albei kyk na my, wag vir 'n antwoord. Al wat ek hoof te doen is om die sirkus te noem, dan sal alle twyfel oor my eerbaarheid by die venster uit vlieg, en ek en my tas direk agterna.

"Ek is 'n weeskind," sê ek hartseer. "My gesin is in die griepepidemie oorlede en ek het sedertdien by my tante gebly wat 'n oujongnooi is. Toe sy egter 'n paar weke gelede in 'n brand oorlede is, kon ek eenvoudig nie langer die pynlike herinneringe in my tuisdorp hanteer nie. Ek het hierheen gekom om 'n nuwe lewe te begin. Ek het pas werk by die restaurant gekry. Ek begin môreoggend en –"

"Dit is waar, juffrou Hansen," sê Harry. "Ek het vanaand daar geëet en Ethel hoor sê dat sy die werk kan kry."

Juffrou Hansen gaan wys my teësinig my kamer. Ek snak verstom na my asem toe ek dit sien. "O, dit is pragtig! En dit is so groot."

Ek moes vir die grootste deel van my lewe soos 'n sardientjie saam met my pa in sy klein kompartement bly, en ek het nog minder ruimte in die vroue se slaapwa gehad. Ek is heeltemal verstom oor al die ruimte tussen die bed en die skryftafel, tussen die skryftafel en die deur, tussen die bed en die muur. Daar is selfs 'n pragtige klein spieëltafel met 'n geriffelde lappie op en 'n groot vierkantige spieël wat ek heeltemal net vir myself het. Juffrou Hansen kyk baie agterdogtig na my terwyl in die kamer rondkyk asof dit 'n paleis is.

"Dit is nie 'n groot kamer nie," sê sy. "Ek het baie groter kamers vir egpare, jy weet."

"Dit is pragtig. Baie dankie, juffrou Hansen."

Sy gee vir Harry 'n kamer op die boonste verdieping en sit my in 'n kamer reg langs haar eie een. Ek dink sy bly die hele nag wakker en luister of sy

enige aanduidings van 'n gekafoefel kan hoor.

My bed is groot en gemaklik, maar ek maak skaars 'n oog toe. Buiten vir die wintermaande is hierdie een van die min kere in my lewe dat ek nie op 'n bewegende trein slaap nie en ek kan nie aan die stilte gewoond raak nie. Ek mis die gerusstellende gerammel van die wiele op die spoor, die sagte geskud. Ek weier om oor my verraderlike ouers te huil, maar ek huil oor tannie Peanut, en oor Sylvia en Lazlo, en oor die Gambrini-gesin, en oor Charlie en Zippy, en oor al die ander mense in my sirkusfamilie. Toe dit egter die volgende oggend tyd is om aan te trek en werk toe te gaan, vee ek my trane af en begin die eerste dag van my nuwe lewe in Deer Springs.

Harry daag rondom halfagt op vir ontbyt en gee vir my 'n hupstoot in my selfvertroue net toe ek dit die nodigste het. "Jy doen goed, pop ... en jy lyk soos 'n miljoen dollar in daardie uniform."

"Ek het nooit geweet 'n mens kan 'n eier op soveel verskillende maniere gaarmaak nie," sê ek vir hom. "Dit voel of almal wat ek al vanoggend moes bedien hulle eiers op 'n ander manier wil hê." Ek vertel hom amper dat die sirkuskokke net weet hoe om roereier te maak, maar keer myself net betyds.

"Kan ek jou vanaand met 'n ete bederf?" vra Harry toe ek vir hom sy rekening bring. Hy is 'n aantreklike man en netjies aangetrek, maar hy is 'n bietjie oorgewig in vergelyking met die gespieerde akrobate saam met wie ek grootgeword het. Selfs die werkers is beter gebou as die arme bleeksiel Harry.

"Dankie, Harry, maar ek dink nie –"

"Asseblief? Ek weet jy ken niemand in hierdie dorp nie en ek haat die idee dat jy alleen moet eet."

Ek stem uiteindelik in, hoofsaaklik omdat ek nie weet hoe om te weier nie. Ons eet natuurlik by die restaurant, aangesien dit die enigste ordentlike plek in die dorp is. Ek kom agter Harry is besig om verlief te raak op my toe hy my hand probeer vashou terwyl ons terugstap losieshuis toe. Ek skud my kop en druk my hande in my sakke. Toe ons by die voorstoep kom, vra hy my om vir 'n paar minute by hom te sit.

"Ek vertrek môre met die trein," sê hy, "maar ek sal oor 'n paar weke terug wees in die dorp. Ek sal jou graag weer wil sien, Eliza."

Ek wonder wat om te sê terwyl ek kyk hoe 'n kat oor die straat hardloop. 'n Klein seuntjie ry op sy fiets verby. "Laat ek jou eers 'n vraag vra, Harry," sê ek uiteindelik. "Hou jy daarvan om 'n reisende verkoopsman te wees?"

"Ja, beslis. Dit is 'n wonderlike manier om rond te reis en die land te sien, nuwe mense te ontmoet ... Ek het in 'n klein dorpie soos dié grootgeword en was raadop om daar weg te kom. Hierdie werk as verkoopsman was my goue geleentheid. Hoekom vra jy, pop?"

“Want al wat ek nog ooit wou gehad het, is om ’n huis en ’n gesin te hê, en om in ’n klein dorpie soos Deer Springs te bly.”

“Jy speel seker! Ek sal doodgaan van kloustrofobie as ek hier moet bly.”

“Ons het dan eintlik nie baie gemeen nie, of hoe?” Ek staan op. “Goeienag, Harry. Weereens dankie vir die ete.”

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Om alleen in Deer Springs van daardie trein af te klim is die dapperste ding wat ek nog ooit gedoen het. Dit wys vir jou hoe graag ek daardie tipe lewe wou hê. Ek het in die sirkus geleer hoe om voor te gee en leuens te vertel; ’n plek waar die mensvreter-tier eintlik baie mak is, die afskuwelike sneemens die muwwerige vel van ’n beer is en die narre hulle glimlagte opverf. Ek het dus maar net voorgegee in alles wat ek doen. Nadat ek ’n kettingroker van ’n sjimpansee moes oppas, pla moeilike klante my glad nie. Toe ek tien was, het Lazlo my geleer om al vier balle tegelyk in die lug te hou; daarna was dit dus maklik om te leer hoe om ses tafels tegelyk te bedien. Charlie die nar se hart is gebreek toe Victoria saam met ’n akrobaat weggeloop het, maar hy het steeds die gehoor laat lag. Bianca se senuwees het ingegee nadat Carlo sy ongeluk op die gespanne koord gehad het, maar die vertoning het aangegaan. Dit is hoe ek myself op alles voorberei het – om van die trein af te klim, by die restaurant in te stap en vir ’n werk te vra, en ook om met Sam Wyatt te begin gesels.

Sam is ’n gereelde klant by die restaurant wat gewoonlik kom ontbyt eet, soms middagete en af en toe sommer drie keer ’n dag. Hy sit altyd alleen in ’n eethoekie met ’n onsigbare wolk hartseer wat oor hom hang en dit laat lyk of jy sal natreën as jy te naby aan hom kom. Hy is omtrent drie of vier jaar ouer as ek en op grond van sy oorpak, sy gespierde lyf en sy diep songebrande lyf neem ek aan dat hy seker ’n arbeider op een van die naburige plase is – behalwe dat ek nie kon verstaan hoe ’n plaasarbeider dit kan bekostig om gedurig by die restaurant te eet nie.

Sam is so aantreklik dat ek sukkel om nie na hom te staar wanneer hy in die restaurant is nie. Sy somber gesig en sterk kakebeen het baie karakter en hy het die ligste hare en blouste oë wat ek al ooit gesien het. Ek glimlag en probeer vriendelik wees wanneer ek hom bedien, maar hy hou my op ’n afstand sonder om ooit ’n spier te verroer. Hy kyk byna nooit op nie, en wanneer hy dit wel doen, maak hy nie oogkontak nie. Om die waarheid te sê, hy sê nooit een woord meer as wat nodig is om sy bestelling te plaas en sy

rekening te betaal nie. Hy tree op asof hy nie wil hê enigiemand moet hom raaksien nie; asof hy deel van die eethoekie wil word en verdwyn.

“Wie is hy?” vra ek eendag ’n ander kelnerin genaamd Debbie. “Ek het opgemerk hy kom baie hier.”

Debbie lei my by die kombuis in, asof dit gevaarlik is om gevang te word waar ons hardop oor hom praat. “Dit is Sam Wyatt,” fluister sy. “Hy het saam met sy ouer broer hier in Deer Springs skoolgegaan. Hulle het altyd gesê hy is ’n bietjie ... vreemd. Al die Wyatts is.”

“Vreemd? Hoe so?”

“Jy weet, ietwat stil ... misterieus. Sam het nooit met die ander kinders gemeng nie. Hy was altyd net by sy ouer broer, Matthew.”

“Het hy nie ’n vrou of ’n ma wat vir hom kos maak nie?”

“Sam is nie getroud nie.” Debbie reageer asof dit ’n verregaande idee is. “Hy bestuur Wyatt-boorde saam met sy pa. Net die twee van hulle is nou daar vandat sy ma dood is. Sy twee broers is ook al twee weg. Ek weet nie wie sy pa kos gee nie, maar Sam kom elke paar dae hiernatoe om ’n ordentlike bord kos te kry.”

“Waar het jy gesê bly hy?”

Debbie se wenkbroue lig verbaas. “Het jy nog nie van Wyatt-boorde gehoor nie? Dit is die grootste boord in die omgewing. As jy met Sprucestraat by die dorp uitgaan en vir so drie of vier kilometer aanhou, kan jy dit nie mis nie.”

Die volgende Sondag hoef ek nie te werk nie en ek gaan stap ’n ent met Sprucestraat langs om uit te vind waar die misterieuse Sam Wyatt bly. Debbie is reg; ’n mens kan nie die naam mis wat teen die skuur geverf is nie: *Wyatt-boorde – Frank Wyatt & Seuns, Eienaars*. Ek gee nie ’n snars om vir die boord nie, maar die oomblik toe ek die pragtige huis met die breë voorstoep en donkergroen luike en groot eikebome reg rondom dit sien, weet ek dat ek die huis gekry het waarvan ek my lewe lank al droom. Ek moet eenvoudig hier bly. Ek sál hier bly. Al wat ek moet doen, is om Sam Wyatt se hart te wen.

Met net drie kerke in die dorp is dit nie moeilik om uit te vind na watter een toe hy gaan nie. Die volgende Sondag ná die erediens gaan ek na hom toe asof hy ’n langverlore vriend is.

“Wel, hallo daar ... Onthou jy my? Ek bedien jou soms wanneer jy by die restaurant eet. My naam is Eliza Rose. Wat is jou naam?”

“Sam,” sê hy en staar grond toe. “Sam Wyatt.”

“Dis gaaf om jou uiteindelik te ontmoet, Sam.” Ek steek my hand uit en hy het nie ’n keuse as om dit vat nie. Hy bloos so rooi soos my pappa se neus,



verskoon homself en stap dan vinnig weg.

Om deur al die skanse te breek wat Sam om hom gebou het, is een van die moeilikste goed wat ek nog ooit moes doen. Dit neem my langer as ses maande om dit reg te kry. Dit voel of ek op die sirkuskoord loop en my balans moet probeer hou tussen te vriendelik wees en nie vriendelik genoeg wees nie. Ek weet net een klein foutjie kan my laat val. Ek hou egter net die beeld van daardie pragtige huis in my gedagtes en dink daaraan elke keer wanneer Sam my opsy stoot. Ek werk aan hom, glimlag vir hom en tree vriendelik op by die restaurant, sorg dat ek hom by die kerk groet. Dit is soos om 'n sku perd mak te maak; ek moet hom eers gewoond maak aan my, dan sy vertrouwe wen totdat hy uiteindelik uit my hand uit eet.

Toe Sam een Vrydagaand by die restaurant inkom vir ete, skraap ek al my moed bymekaar om die volgende stap te neem. “Hei, Sam, hoekom sien ek jou nooit by die filmteater nie?” Ek leun op sy tafel sodat ons gesigte naby aan mekaar is. “Gaan jy dan nooit nie?”

Hy kyk op na my, kyk dan vinnig weg. “Mm ... nee.”

“O, jy moet vir 'n slag gaan. Om die waarheid te sê, daar is tans 'n baie opwindende Tarzan-reeks wat vertoon word. Ek is seker jy sal van Lillian Gish se flieks ook hou. Al die mans hou van Lillian Gish. Ek gaan vanaand na die vertoning kyk wat halfagt begin. Hoekom ontmoet jy my nie daar en vind uit wat jy mis nie?”

Hy bly vir so 'n lang ruk stil dat ek seker is hy gaan weier, maar hy kyk uiteindelik op en sê: “Nou goed.”

Ek is verbaas, maar baie in my skik. Ons ontmoet buite die Ritz en daardie eerste keer koop ons elkeen ons eie kaartjie en springmielies. Ná die tyd sê Sam hy het dit baie geniet en sal graag weer wil kom. Dit gee my die moed om die volgende tree te neem.

“Sam, sal jy omgee om saam met my huis toe te stap? Ek word partykeer 'n bietjie bang om so alleen in die donker te stap. Dit is nie ver nie. Ek bly in juffrou Hansen se losieshuis in Wilsonlaan.”

Hy stem in en dit lyk vir my of hy 'n bietjie regopper staan by die idee dat hy my moet beskerm. Ek trek voordeel uit die tyd wat ons saam het om hom sover te kry om oor sy boord te praat.

“Watter soort werk doen jy, Sam?”

“Ek bestuur 'n boord saam met my pa.”

“Hou jy daarvan?” vra ek.

“Ek het nog nooit daaroor gedink nie,” sê hy en trek sy skouers op. “Die boerdery is al wat ek ken. Wat anders sal ek doen?”

Aan die begin is om met Sam te gesels net soos om water uit 'n droë put te

kry. Maar net so stadig soos die veranderende seisoene begin Sam uiteindelik ontspan. Hy begin my nou in die restaurant dophou in plaas van na die tafel voor hom te staar. Toe kom ek agter hy staar in die kerk ook na my in plaas van sy gesangeboek. Hy het so 'n veraf uitdrukking op sy gesig en ek voel sy oë soos twee skerp ligte op my. Een aand soen ek hom in die donker teater. Rudolf Valentino soen die vrou wat die hoofrol speel. Ek draai toe na Sam, wat sy glad geskeerde gesig in my hande en soen hom. Sam moes baie daarvan gehou het, want hy wag daarna nie weer dat ek die eerste tree neem nie.

Ek is egter nie die enigste een wat agtergekom het dat Sam van my begin hou nie. Frank Wyatt peil een oggend op my en Sam af waar ons ná kerk staan en gesels en dit is net soos die plaag van duisternis waarvan die Bybel praat. Ek en Sam gesels die een oomblik nog laggend en die volgende oomblik blokkeer Frank die son.

Ek is dadelik doodbang vir Sam se pa. Hy lyk na 'n koue, hartelose man. My opinie van hom verander ook nie nadat ek hom leer ken nie. Op die heel eerste Sondag toe hy my ontmoet, begin hy my dadelik uitvra: wie ek is, waar ek vandaan kom, wat ek in Deer Springs doen. Ek weet ek sal nooit vir hom die waarheid kan vertel nie.

“My gesin is in die griepidemie oorlede, meneer Wyatt.”

“Het jy gesê jou van is ‘Gerard’? Watter soort van is dit?”

“Ek dink dit is Frans. My pa is in New Orleans gebore.”

“New Orleans! Watter soort werk het jou pa daar gedoen?”

Ek sien my pa met sy wit gesig en rooi pruik en bolneus en oorgroot skoene, en my oë skiet vol trane. Ek sê vir myself ek wil huil omdat ek bang is vir Frank en nie omdat ek my pa mis nie. Sam sien my trane en aanvaar verkeerdelik dit is as gevolg van smart.

“Dit is nog vir Eliza moeilik om oor haar gesin te praat,” sê hy vir sy pa. Hy haal 'n sakdoek uit sy sak en gee dit vir my toe hy my van Frank af weglei. “Ek is jammer oor my pa,” fluister hy.

“Ek dink hy hou nie van my nie.”

“Hy hou van niemand nie, Eliza. Hy tree so teenoor almal op.”

Ek weet Frank Wyatt is nie tevrede met die manier waarop ek sy vrae beantwoord het nie. Daarom begin ek toe my leuens fyn uitwerk. Ek dink aan eerbare beroepe vir my pa en ek oefen in my gedagtes al die besonderhede oor waar Pappa sy opleiding gehad het en waar ons gebly het sodat ek gereed kan wees vir die volgende keer wanneer Frank my ondervra. Ek wil nie die kanse ruïneer wat ek het om in daardie pragtige huis by die boord te bly nie.

Teen hierdie tyd kom maak Sam gereeld 'n draai by die losieshuis om my te sien. Hy vertel my later hy het aangetrokke tot my gevoel omdat ek so

misterieus en eksoties is, en dit het vir hom gelyk of ek kennis van die wêreld het wat hy nie het nie. Ek hou van Sam, maar ek kry nooit regtig die kans om hom goed te leer ken nie. Elke keer wanneer ek in sy blou oë kyk, sien ek baie smart en pyn daarin. Selfs ná al die tyd wat ons al saam deurgebring het, het ek steeds geen idee wie hy regtig is of wat die hartseer veroorsaak het nie. Sam bly in talle opsigte vir my 'n vreemdeling en aangesien ek die een leuen ná die ander vertel, is ek seker maar vir hom ook 'n vreemdeling.

Nadat ons vir ongeveer drie maande gereeld uitgaan en die hele tyd in die teater soen, besluit ek om ons hofmakery na die volgende vlak te neem. Maar net soos met daardie eerste soen, weet ek dat ek die leiding sal moet neem.

“Ek dink ek is besig om lief te word vir jou,” sê ek toe ons een aand styf teen mekaar op juffrou Hansen se stoepswaai sit. Selfs in die donker sien ek die verbasing in sy oë.

“Is jy lief ... vir my?”

“Ja,” jok ek. “Hoekom verbaas dit jou so?”

“Jy is beeldskoon, Eliza. Ek het nooit gedink ek sal gelukkig genoeg wees dat so 'n mooi meisie vir my sal val nie.”

“Wel ... ? Is jy lief vir my ook, Sam Wyatt?”

Hy kyk my stip in die oë en ek sien die waarheid nog voordat hy dit sê. “Ja,” fluister hy. “Ja, ek is. Meer as wat ek in woorde kan uitdruk.”

Ek kan nie vir jou sê hoe skuldig sy liefdesverklaring my laat voel nie. Ek het hom die afgelope paar maande gelei en getem en myself tot in sy lewe gewurm totdat hy sy hart volkome vir my gegee het. Ek is waarskynlik die enigste mens wat onlangs vir Sam gesê het ek is lief vir hom, en tog was alles net toneelspel. Ek hou van Sam, ek voel jammer vir hom, maar ek is nie lief vir hom nie. Tog skuif ek die skuldgevoelens opsy en sê: “Weet jy wat, Sam? Ek sal in 'n oogwink met jou trou indien jy my vra.”

Hy lyk stomgeslaan. “My pa sal nooit vir ons sy toestemming gee nie.”

Ek druk my lippe teen sy oor. “Is jy nie al oud genoeg om jou eie besluite te neem nie?”

“Ja, maar ... ”

“Wel, ek sal nie omgee vir 'n weglouptroue nie. Wat sal jou pa ná die tyd daaraan kan doen?”

“Ek weet nie.” Hy los my en sit sy hande op sy skoot toe hy agtertoe leun teen die swaai se rugleuning. “Ek weet nie,” herhaal hy.

Sam is doodbang vir sy pa. Ek kan dit so duidelik sien. Ek sal iets moet doen om sy gedagtes van sy vrees af weg te lei. Ek gee hom 'n paar dae om die idee aan trou te oordink, want ek het geleer Sam hou daarvan om dinge te deurdink voordat hy dit doen. Toe ons 'n week later weer styf teen mekaar op

die stoep sit, probeer ek nog 'n keer.

“Ek is lief vir jou, Sam,” fluister ek. “As ons getroud was, sou dit nie nodig gewees het om mekaar te groet wanneer juffrou Hansen die stoepligte afsit nie. Ons kan die hele nag aanhou soen, net soos dit ... ” Ek vou my hande om sy gesig en gee vir hom die mees hartstogtelike soen wat hy nog in sy hele lewe gehad het. Daarna verdwyn alle gedagtes aan sy pa soos mis voor die son.

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Ons weglooptroue is die enigste opstandige ding wat Sam in sy hele lewe doen. Ons hou wittebrood in 'n hotel anderkant die staatsgrens en ek dink nie hy bekommer hom een keer daardie nag oor sy pa nie. Maar die volgende dag ... !

Die volgende dag bewee Sam se broek behoorlik toe hy my huis toe vat. Hy is 'n groot man, net so groot en sterk soos sy pa, maar ons al twee se knieë bewee toe ons daardie oggend by die kombuis instap.

“Waar was jy die hele nag?” eis Frank. As hy ons kon doodkyk, sou die sheriff vir Frank kom arresteer het omdat hy ons albei vermoor het.

“Ek en Eliza het gisteraand oor die staatsgrens gery om 'n vrederegter te gaan sien,” sê Sam skrikkerig. “Ons is getroud.”

“Jy is getroud? Met hierdie ... hierdie rondloper?”

“Ek is lief vir haar.”

“O ja, ek is seker jy is.” Sy stem is die ene sarkasme. “Jy sal nogtans reguit na John Wakefield toe gaan sodat hy hierdie dwase flater ongedaan kan maak. Ek sal haar nie onder my dak duld nie.”

“Nee,” sê Sam sag. “Nee, ek sal nie toelaat dat ons huwelik herroep word nie.” Hy sit sy gespieerde arm om my middel en trek my nader. “Eliza is my vrou en ek is lief vir haar. As Pa dit nie kan aanvaar nie ... sal ons albei moet gaan.”

Sam en Frank staar baie lank na mekaar. Ek besef eers wat 'n dapper ding Sam gedoen het nadat ek 'n paar jaar onder een dak saam met Frank Wyatt gebly het. Toe hy daardie oggend standpunt teen sy pa ingeneem het, het hy die risiko geloop om alles te verloor wat hy het – ter wille van my. Ek het ook nie in daardie stadium besef hoe vreemd dit is vir Frank om terug te staan en toe te gee nie. Maar dit is tog wat hy doen.

“Nou goed, maar ek belowe jou een ding,” sê Frank en druk sy vinger onder Sam se neus. “Ek sal die volgende nege maande noukeurig aftel en as

sy voor daardie tyd 'n baba het, gooi ek haar en die kind uit op straat waar hulle hoort.”

Jimmy word gelukkig eers een week ná ons eerste huweliksherdenking gebore.

Buiten vir die haatdraende manier waarop my skoonpa na my kyk, is ek baie tevrede in my huwelik. Ek het die huis waarna ek nog altyd smag, selfs al sluit dit vir Frank Wyatt in. Van die heel eerste dag af dat ek my voete in Sam se huis gesit het, weet ek dat ek nooit iewers anders wil bly nie. Dit is nie dat alles luuks en nuut is nie – dit is nie. Die muurpapier is dof en daar is plekke waar die mat al deureskaaf het, en die houttrappe kraak wanneer 'n mens boontoe gaan, maar dit is presies dié dinge in die huis wat ek liefhet. Ek het my lewe lank geen geskiedenis en permanensie gehad nie, maar ek sien albei dié dinge in elke objek in die huis. Ek dink stories uit oor al die mense wat voor my hier gebly het en die geskiedenis van die meublement wat hulle agtergelaat het. Ek wil nie een enkele ding verander nie. Elke aand wanneer ek in Sam se arms lê en die trein in die verte hoor fluit, dink ek aan die eensaamheid en verlange wat ek my lewe lank gevoel het en ek wonder of die mense op daardie trein na my plaashuis kyk en wens hulle was ek.

Daardie eerste winter van my en Sam se getroude lewe stuur ek vir tannie Peanut 'n brief na die sirkus se winteradres in Georgia.

*Liewe tannie Peanut*

*Ek wil net laat weet dat ek nog leef, dat dit goed gaan en dat ek gelukkig is. Ek is met 'n baie goeie man getroud en ons bly in 'n pragtige huis in die platteland. Stuur asseblief groete vir Charlie en die Gambrini-familie en vir al die ander.*

*Liefde*

*Eliza*

Ek sit nie my adres agterop die koevert nie en pos dit van 'n dorpie meer as vyftien kilometer van Deer Springs af toe ek daarheen gaan om die dokter te sien. Ek het toe reeds geweet dat ek vir Jimmy verwag en om die een of ander onbekende rede het Frank Wyatt my verbied om na dokter Gilbert in Deer Springs toe te gaan.

Sam skrik hom byna dood toe ek hom vertel hy gaan pa word.

“Wat makeer, Sam? Wil jy nie kinders hê nie?” vra ek.

“Nee ... Ek weet nie. Ek het nog nooit regtig daaroor gedink nie ... Nee.”

“Hoekom nie? Waarvoor is jy bang?”

Hy antwoord my nie. Die pyn in Sam se oë is so intens dat my hart vir hom pyn. Ek wens ek was so lief vir hom soos hy vir my, want dan sou ek dalk al die pyn kon wegvat wat hy diep in homself opgegaar het. Sam stap uiteindelik

by ons slaapkamer uit en verdwyn in die nag. Hy bly 'n baie lang ruk weg. Tog is hy baie teer met my tydens my swangerskap, asof hy dink hy gaan die baba seermaak indien hy my te styf vasdruk.

Toe my tyd aanbreek, laat Frank vir Sam in die middel van die nag al die pad na die naburige dorp ry om 'n dokter te gaan haal. Die hele tyd terwyl ek in kraam is, dink ek aan my eie ma, aan hoe sy my weggegee het, en ek besef ek is net so bang soos Sam om hierdie kind te hê. Ek huil toe die dokter uiteindelik vir klein Jimmy in my arms neerlê, oorweldig deur die oneindige liefde wat ek vir hom voel. Tog sidder ek terselfdertyd van vrees by die gedagte dat ek hom dalk sal seermaak, vir hom sal jok, hom dalk sal verlaat soos my ma my verlaat het. Dit is skrikwekkend om só lief te wees vir iemand.

“Wat makeer?” vra Sam toe hy my daardie eerste aand oor Jimmy sien huil.

“Ek is ook maar bang,” erken ek. “Dit is moeilik vir my om 'n ma te wees, want ek het sonder een grootgeword.”

Sam kom sit langs my op die bed, 'n verwarde uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Ek dog dan jy het gesê jou hele gesin is in die griepiepidemie oorlede?”

Hy het my uitgevang dat ek jok! Ek voel paniekerig. “Mm ... nee ... dit was my stiefma,” sê ek vinnig. “Sy was nooit regtig 'n ma vir my nie.” Ek moet gou die onderwerp verander. Ek lig vir Jimmy op en gee hom vir Sam voordat hy kan protesteer. “Hier ... hou jy hom vas.”

Jimmy kriewel, maar raak dan rustig in sy pa se sterk arms. Hy is wakker en hy kyk na Sam asof hy sy gesig memoriseer. Sam se oë skiet vol tranes. “Genade ... goeie genade ...” fluister hy. “Hy is so klein. Ek weet nie hoe om 'n goeie pa te wees nie. Ek is so bang ek sal ...”

Teen hierdie tyd bly ek al lank genoeg in dieselfde huis as Frank Wyatt om te weet hoekom Sam so bang is. Ek dink aan die advies wat tannie Peanut eenkeer vir my pa gegee het.

“Jy hoef nie bang te wees nie, Sam,” sê ek vir hom. “Wees jy maar net die pa wat jy altyd gewens het jy kon hê. As jy wens dat jou pa jou saans in die bed gesit het, sit dan vir klein Jimmy in die bed. As jy wens dat jou pa saam met jou gaan visvang het, vat hom dan om te gaan visvang. Dit is al wat jy hoef te doen.”

“Regtig?” fluister hy.

“Ja. Dit is al wat nodig is.”

Sam het elkeen van ons kinders van hulle geboortedag af met sy hele hart lief. Hy sê dit nooit hardop nie, waarskynlik omdat hy dit nooit by sy eie pa gehoor het en nie geweet het hoe om dit te doen nie, maar ek kan sien hoe lief

hy hulle het. As hy ongeduldig raak met een van hulle sal hy vinnig wegstap in plaas van sy humeur verloor en ek bewonder hom daarvoor. Hy slaan nooit enigeen van hulle uit woede nie. Toe Becky Jean gebore is, staar hy net na haar terwyl die trane oor sy wange loop. “’n Dogtertjie ... ’n Pragtige klein dogtertjie,” sê hy sag. “Sy lyk nie werklik nie, Eliza. Sy lyk soos ... soos ’n klein engeltjie wat daar lê.”

Ek voel dieselfde liefde en vrees as Sam. Ek gaan soms in die nag by my kinders se kamers in en kyk hoe hulle slaap. Dan verwonder ek my aan die feit dat hulle deel van my is, en tog ook nie. Dit maak my angsbevange om te weet hoe nodig hulle my het, hoe afhanklik van my hulle is. Ek is so bang dat ek hulle sal teleurstel, hulle dalk selfs in die steek sal laat. Soms onthou ek hoe my pa met vrees in sy oë na my gekyk het en ek wonder of dit om dieselfde rede was.

Ek kom eenkeer baie naby daaraan om vir Sam die waarheid oor my verlede te vertel. Jimmy het pas vier geword en Luke was twee toe ek hoor dat ’n mededinger se sirkus na ons skougronde toe kom. Ek was so opgewonde om te dink dat ek en Sam saam op die pawiljoen kan sit om saam met ons twee seuns na die sirkus te kyk, net soos al die gesinne wat ek altyd beny het. Ek is van plan om te wag tot ek die aand teen Sam opgekrul in die bed lê en dan sal ek hom vertel hoe dit alles vir my ’n droom is wat waar geword het. Voordat ek egter ’n kans kry om daaroor te praat, kom ’n verteenwoordiger van die sirkus in Deer Springs aan en klop aan ons kombuisdeur net toe ons gereedmaak om middagete te eet.

“Goeiemiddag, mense. Ek is ’n verteenwoordiger van die Gentry Brothers-sirkus en ons gaan volgende maand hier op julle skougronde kom optree. Ek wil graag vir julle hele familie gratis kaartjies gee indien julle my sal toelaat om ons advertensie teen julle skuur se muur op te sit.”

Frank vaar uit in ’n verskriklike woedeuitbarsting en skree oor hoe sirkusmense rondloop terwyl hulle skaars ordentlike klere aanhet, hoe hulle almal ’n onsedelike leefwyse volg, en hoe skandelik dit is vir Christenmense om dit selfs te oorweeg om sirkus toe te gaan. Hy skree so hard dat klein Luke begin huil. Ek kyk hoe my skoonpa daardie arme man by die deur uitgooi en ek weet ek sal nooit ’n woord kan sê oor die feit dat ek in ’n sirkus grootgeword het nie. My kinders sal ook nooit die geleentheid kry om sirkus toe te gaan terwyl hulle oupa leef nie.

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My man werk sy lewe lank om sy pa tevrede te stel – ’n onmoontlike taak aangesien dit onmoontlik is om Frank Wyatt tevrede te stel. Sam ervaar nooit regtig sy pa se liefde of goedkeuring nie; ook nie op sy sterfbed nie. Hy moes in die eerste plek nooit siek geword het nie.

Dit begin as net ’n eenvoudige sny aan sy voet – ’n spyker of iets anders het deur die sool van sy verweerde werkstewel gestee en hom gesny. Sy voet is seer, maar hy hou aan werk, hinkpink in die skuur rond terwyl hy die mis na buite karwei en die koeie melk.

“Ek moet seker ’n nuwe paar stewels kry,” sê hy daardie aand en wys vir my die gat in sy sool. Ek versorg die sny aan sy voet, maar nie een van ons is juis bekommerd daaroor nie. Dit is September, ’n besige tyd van die jaar in die boord, en Sam bly kruppel rondstap terwyl hy daardie selfde stewels dra, want daar is nie tyd om gou Deer Springs toe te gaan om ’n nuwe paar te koop nie.

’n Paar dae later word hy wakker met laegraadse koors. Hy kla van ’n stywe kakebeen en seer nek, en sê sy hele lyf is seer. Ons albei dink hy het griep. Ek kan sien dat Sam baie sleg voel, maar hy sleep homself na buite om ’n hele dag se werk te doen, koors ofte nie, want dit is wat sy pa van hom verwag. Hy word net al hoe sieker.

Een aand word ek wakker van Sam se gekreun. Sy koors is nie so vreeslik hoog nie, maar hy sweet so erg dat die bed se lakens nat is. Sy hart klop ook vreeslik vinnig.

“Sam, wat makeer? Wat is fout?”

Hy kan my nie antwoord nie. Die spiere in sy nek en kakebeen is in so ’n verskriklike spasma dat dit sy gesig vertrek en sy kakebeen vries. Ek spring uit die bed uit en begin aantrek. “Ek gaan die dokter haal.”

“Nee ... ” kreun hy.

“Hoekom nie? Sam, ek is bang. Sê nou ... ?” Dit maak my bang om te dink dat dit klem-in-die-kaak is, maar ek wil dit nie hardop sê en Sam ontstel nie. “Luister, as ek vir dokter Gilbert in Deer Springs gaan haal, kan ek oor ’n halfuur terug wees.”

“My pa ... sal nie toelaat ... ” kry hy die woorde uiteindelik uit.

Ek weet nie wat om te doen nie. Al my instinkte dwing my om hulp te gaan soek, maar elke keer wanneer ek net noem dat ek die dokter wil laat kom, krap dit Sam net meer om.

Die volgende oggend is hy glad nie beter nie. Die oomblik toe ek my skoonpa hoor roer, hardloop ek ondertoe om hom te konfronteer.

“Waar is my ontbyt?” vra Frank toe hy my sien. “En waar is Sam?”

“Hy kan nie opstaan nie.” My stem bewe van vrees. “Hy is siek.



Verskriklik siek. Hy het 'n dokter nodig.”

“Siek! Die koeie moet gemelk word. Ek het hom boonop in die boord nodig.” Hy gluur my aan asof Sam se siekte my skuld is.

“Hy kan nie werk nie. Gaan boontoe en kyk self.”

Frank brom brom vies asof ek 'n simpel, histeriese vrou is en kyk weg. “Hy is 'n sterk seun. Hy sal oor 'n dag of twee gesond wees.”

“Nee, hy is baie siek!” skree ek. “Gaan kyk self. Ons moet 'n dokter laat kom.”

Frank se oë blits van woede toe hy vinnig omdraai en met sy vinger na my wys. “Moet nóóit vir my sê wat om te doen nie.” Hy slaan die kombuisdeur agter hom toe.

Ek het my eie werkies om te doen en ek moet kos maak en aandag aan die kinders gee, maar elke keer wanneer ek deur die loop van die dag by Sam inloer, lyk hy slegter. Die spierspasmas versprei na sy abdomen en bene en rug en dit is so gewelddadig en pynlik dat sy lyf so styf soos 'n plank trek en sy rug wegtrek van die bed af. Sam is wakker en by sy volle bewussyn – en in gewelddige pyn.

Ek is die hele middag op die uitkyk vir my skoonpa en van plan om hom weer te konfronteer die oomblik wanneer ek hom sien, maar hy bly die hele dag in sy boord en kom eers vir aandete terug huis toe. Ek sou lankal reeds die kinders ingelaai en hulp gaan soek het, maar Frank het die span perde by hom en ek weet nie hoe om die bakkie te bestuur nie.

Ek wag totdat Frank klaar die tafelgebed gedoen het en sê dan so kalm as wat ek kan: “Sam het 'n dokter nodig. Ek dink hy het klem-in-die-kaak.”

Frank vat die bak kapokaartappels sonder om eens na my te kyk. “So, nou is jy skielik 'n mediese deskundige?”

“Nee ... maar 'n kundige is nie nodig om te sien hoe siek hy is nie.” Ek het myself belowe ek sal nie huil nie, maar ek kan my trane nie keer nie. “Asseblief, meneer Wyatt, hy het verskriklik baie pyn. Ek kan dit nie verdra om te sien hoe hy ly nie.”

Frank eet in stilte.

“Asseblief,” smeek ek. “Laat ek asseblief dorp toe ry en die dokter gaan haal.”

Hy lig sy kop en praat hard. “Jy sal nie aan my bakkie of my perde raak nie. My seun het nie 'n dokter nodig nie!”

Toe weet ek wat ek moet doen. Nadat ek my kinders in die bed gesit het, gaan ek sag by die huis se voordeur uit en hardloop al die pad tot in Deer Springs. Ek is so ontsteld en bewe van kop tot toon van uitputting en woede en vrees dat dit my 'n hele paar minute neem om dokter Gilbert te oortuig dat

ek nie die een is wat mediese sorg nodig het nie.

“Nee, asseblief, dokter Gilbert. Dit is my man, Sam, wat jou hulp nodig het, nie ek nie.”

“Sam Wyatt?”

“Ja. Ek dink hy het klem-in-die-kaak. Ek dink hy is besig om te sterf. Kom saam, asseblief.”

Hy vra my om Sam se simptome te beskryf en te oordeel na die somber uitdrukking op sy gesig, weet ek dat ek rede het om bekommerd te wees. Hy maak sy kas oop en begin goed in sy dokterstas pak terwyl hy my ondervra.

“Weet Frank Wyatt jy is hier?” vra hy my toe hy klaar is.

“Nee. Hy weier om hulp te laat kom. Ek moes al die pad tot hier loop. Hy wou nie eens boontoe gaan om self te kyk hoe siek Sam is nie.”

Dokter Gilbert skud sy kop. Hy pers sy lippe opmekaar en ek kan aan die kyk in sy oë sien dat hy woedend is. “Jy weet dat Frank my dalk nie sal toelaat om by die deur in te gaan nie.”

“Jy moet probeer, dokter Gilbert. Asseblief, moenie dat Sam sterf nie.” Ek is byna histeries.

Hy vat my skouers vas en sy stewige greep stel my gerus. “Ek sal my beste doen, mevrou Wyatt. Jy moet dalk eers ’n bietjie brandewyn drink voordat ons gaan.”

“Ek sal oukei wees. Maak net gou.”

Ons ry sommer gou in dokter Gilbert se kar terug plaas toe. Ek oortuig hom om ’n ent van die huis af in die pad te stop sodat my skoonpa ons nie sal hoor nie en ons stap in die donker aan huis toe. Frank se slaapkamer is reg langs die kombuis; dus lei ek dokter Gilbert by die voordeur in en dan gaan ons haastig op boontoe.

Sam lyk erger as toe ek hier weg is. Hy draai na ons toe ons by die slaapkamer inkom en ek sien die paniekerigheid in sy oë. Dan trek sy rug skielik krom. “Help my!” sê hy tussen sy tande deur toe sy kake op mekaar klem van pyn.

Dokter Gilbert ondersoek hom sagkens, maar die geringste aanraking veroorsaak dat Sam se spiere hewig saamtrek. Ek staan langs die bed, vryf my hande inmekaar en skrik my byna dood toe ek skielik Frank se harde stem agter my hoor.

“Wat doen jy in my huis, Gilbert?”

Dokter Gilbert draai stadig om en kyk na hom. “Ek behandel jou seun – ”

“Nee, jy gaan hom nie behandel nie. Ons het jou nie hier nodig nie. Maak dat jy hier wegkom!”

“Frank, jou seun het tetanus,” sê hy sag. “Hy is baie siek. Ek gaan vir hom

antitoksien inspuit en – ”

My gil onderbreek hom. Sam begin stuiptrekkings kry. Sy vel word ’n aaklige blougrys kleur en hy sukkel om asem te kry.

“Hy kry stuipe,” sê dokter Gilbert. “Dit veroorsaak dat hy nie suurstof kry nie.” Hy gryp Sam aan die skouers en probeer hom op die bed vasdruk.

Ek het nog nooit in my lewe so bang en hulpeloos gevoel nie. Toe die stuipe uiteindelik ophou, maak dokter Gilbert gereed om hom ’n inspuiting te gee.

“Ek gaan vir jou die antitoksien vir tetanus inspuit, Sam. Dan iets wat jou spiëre sal help ontspan.”

Ek kyk oor my skouer, bang dat Frank hom sal probeer keer, maar my skoonpa is weg.

Dokter Gilbert doen daardie nag alles wat hy kan vir Sam. Hy wys my selfs hoe om ’n kompres te maak en dit op die wond aan Sam se voet te sit. Aan die manier waarop die dokter my aan die skouers vat toe dit tyd is vir hom om te gaan, weet ek dat hy net so bekommerd is oor Sam soos ek.

“Ek moet eerlik met jou wees, mevrou Wyatt, en vir jou sê dat jou man baie siek is. Tetanus-antitoksien is op sy doeltreffendste wanneer dit gegee word sodra die simptome verskyn, maar ... Wel, daardie besluit was nie in ons hande nie.” Hy sug en tel sy dokterstas op. “Ek sal vroeg môreoggend weer hierlangs kom.”

My man se siekte is te ver gevorder vir die antitoksien om te werk. Dokter Gilbert kan niks vir hom doen nie, en ek ook nie. Sam sterf ’n aaklige, pynlike dood toe die stuipe uiteindelik so erg word dat hy ophou asemhaal. Tog is hy wakker en tot aan die einde bewus van alles wat om hom gebeur. Die laaste woorde wat hy my hoor sê het, is: “Ek is lief vir jou, Sam.”

Die dag toe hy dood is, is ek so ontsteld dat ek voor die kinders teenoor my skoonpa uitvaar. “Dit is alles jou skuld!” skree ek. “Sam is dood, want jy wou nie gaan hulp kry nie. Jy is verantwoordelik vir jou eie seun se dood. As jy vroeër ’n dokter gaan haal het, kon Sam die antitoksien betyds gekry het en dan sou hy nie gesterf het nie.”

Frank reageer nie op my uitbarsting nie. Hy staar deur my met dowwe oë en ek wonder of hy ooit ’n woord gehoor het wat ek sê. Die haatdraende, manipulerende Frank Wyatt saam met wie ek die afgelope tien jaar geleef het, is daardie dag saam met sy seun dood en ’n gebroke, bitter ou man het in sy plek agtergebly. Watter nut het sy boord en alles wat hy opgebou het sonder ’n seun om dit te erf? Tog kry ek vir Frank glad nie jammer nie. Hy moet oes wat hy gesaai het.

Voor Sam se dood het my skoonpa skaars my kinders raakgesien. Ek het

altyd gedink hy haat hulle omdat hy my haat. Toe hy egter langs die grafte van sy vrou en twee seuns staan, kyk hy stadig op en sien vir Jimmy en Luke wat aan my vasklou, hulle gesigte bleek van smart. Hy kyk na sy kleinseuns, kyk werklik vir die eerste keer na hulle en ek dink hy het skielik besef hulle is al wat hy oorhet.

“O, liewe God ...” fluister hy.

Frank is anders ná Sam se dood – nie vriendeliker nie, en beslis ook nie warmer of meer liefdevol teenoor my of die kinders nie. Maar hy is ’n gebroke man, en ek en hy weet dit albei. Ons leef saam soos vreemdelinge in ’n losieshuis; praat skaars, sien mekaar net met etenstye.

Een koue Novemberdag ’n jaar later kry Jimmy sy oupa waar hy op die vloer in die skuur lê. Ek gaan haastig buitetoe toe ek my seun se verskrikte gille hoor, maar die oomblik toe ek in die koue, leë oë kyk van die man wat ek gehaat het, weet ek hy is dood. Ek voel nie eens ’n bietjie hartseer nie. Om die waarheid te sê, ek kom agter ek wens hy het twee keer soveel gely as wat Sam gely het. Ek is op die punt om my rug op hom te draai toe ek sien dat Frank se hande leeg is. Hulle lê oop, palms na bo, en daar is niks in nie. Hy het sy lewe lank met daardie hande gegryp en beheer en gemanipuleer om sy eie sin te kry, en nou is dit leeg. Frank Wyatt se boord en alles waarvoor hy gewerk het, behoort nou aan iemand anders.

# Wyatt Orchards

*Winter 1931– 1932*

“While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest,  
and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night  
shall not cease.”

GENESIS 8:22

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aunt Batty and I sat at the kitchen table as the sun rose that morning. The cows needed to be milked, the horses had to be fed and watered, and the boys had to eat breakfast and get ready for school. But I felt too weary to move. Telling my story after all those years left me feeling empty and drained. My mama had left me and Sam had left me, and now Gabe had gone off and left me, too. What was wrong with me that made everybody turn their back and walk away from me?

“You were very blessed to have had parents who loved you so much,” Aunt Batty said quietly.

“Are you crazy?” I asked. “Weren’t you listening to me? Daddy never once told me he loved me, and Mama said it all the time and then she abandoned me!”

“You’re standing too close to see it, Toots. Your father showed you how much he loved you in a hundred different ways.”

“How? Name one!”

“He guided your decisions, raised you by the Good Book, took you to church. He made sure you didn’t grow up to become a circus oddity, but instead a warm, loving woman who could become the person God intended you to be. Most of all, he let you go when the time came. He did everything a good parent should do. That’s why you’re such a wonderful parent yourself. You learned how to love from your daddy.”

“But he lied to me about my mama!”

“Are you sure that’s the way it was?” she asked gently.

When I thought about it, I had to admit that Daddy had never exactly said Mama was dead. I slowly pulled myself to my feet and opened one of the stove lids to put another stick of wood on the fire. “Well, I’m sure that my mother abandoned me,” I said, closing the lid again.

Aunt Batty stood, too, and opened the dish cupboard, talking to me as she set the table for breakfast. “It looks to me like your mama knew she couldn’t take proper care of you, and she loved you enough to give you to someone who could. My sister gave up her own chance at happiness for her child’s sake, too. You know all about that kind of mother-love, don’t you, Eliza? Just look at how hard you’ve been working to hang on to this orchard and provide for your kids. Your mother didn’t abandon you, Toots. She made the greatest sacrifice a mother could make.”

I watched Aunt Batty putting plates around the table and saw that she had taken out one too many. She started placing it where Gabe always sat, then caught herself.

“Gabe abandoned me,” I said, fighting tears.

“Well, it looks that way right now,” she said. “But Gabe loved all of us. Maybe he had a good reason for what he did. Maybe he made a sacrifice for the people he loved, too.”

“Ha! I doubt that! From what Sheriff Foster said, it looks to me like Gabe was trying to save his own skin and keep from getting arrested.”

Aunt Batty didn’t reply. She put silverware by all the places and poured milk in the kids’ glasses while I got out the frying pan and started cracking eggs into a bowl to scramble them. When I realized that I’d added enough eggs for Gabe, miscounting just like Aunt Batty had, I covered my face.

“What am I going to do without him?” I wept.

Aunt Batty took me in her arms. “You’ve been depending on Gabe’s help,” she said gently, “instead of on God’s. But He knows all about

how you feel. Jesus suffered the pain of being abandoned when He hung on the cross for us. He cried out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ He made that sacrifice so that He could say to His children, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ When everyone else is gone, Eliza, God is still here.”

She led me back to a chair and sat me down, then took over cooking the eggs. “God knew when it was time for Gabe to leave,” she continued, “just like He knew when it was time for Walter to go. God did it so that you and I would both turn to Him for strength and discover the strength He’s been trying to build inside us all this time. Look back on your life, Toots, and think about all the experiences God gave you—the good ones and the bad ones—and you’ll see how they’ve shaped you into the woman you are today. Accept those experiences as His daily bread. Thank Him for them. Then be the person He created you to be. Growing up without a home has given you the will and the determination you’ll need to run this place....And your juggling skills will come in handy, too.”

Aunt Batty smiled as she tried to juggle the broken eggshells, and I had to laugh as they all fell to the tabletop. She giggled along with me.

“Will you teach me how to do that sometime, Toots?” she asked.

“Sure, Aunt Batty.”

She gave the eggs in the frying pan a quick stir, then took a loaf of bread out of the bread box and began slicing it for toast. “Listen,” she said, “all these troubles you’ve been having aren’t a punishment from God. He wants to use them to draw you closer to himself—just like your mama’s illness, which was a terrible tragedy, forced you to draw closer to your daddy.”

I dried my eyes and stood up to help her. “I guess I haven’t thought much about God these past few years,” I said. “The way my father-in-law talked about God made Him seem like somebody I didn’t really



want to know.”

“That’s because Frank read the Bible and went to church, but he didn’t know God. He just had religion. Eliza, it’s good that you know about the Bible and that your daddy took you to church, but you need to get to know God.”

“How do I do that?”

“Ask Him for help when you need it. Talk things over with Him the same way you used to talk with your Aunt Peanut or with Gabe. You have to learn to trust God to catch you when you feel like you’re going to fall, just like those acrobats trusted each other. God may be big and strong, but He’ll never crush you. Everything God does in our lives is perfect, even if doesn’t always look that way on the outside. Your friends in the sideshow taught you that.”

“I miss them all so much,” I said. “They were my family, and I haven’t been able to talk about any of them for ten years.”

“You’ll miss Gabe, too,” she said, laying her hand on my shoulder. “We all will. But even if Gabe was still here, he couldn’t meet all of your needs. Only God can do that. Gabe could help you work in the orchard, but only God can make the apples grow.”

Later that morning I took a walk out in the orchard. I knew it was high time I talked to God. I told Him all the things I was sorry for, all the things I was afraid of, and I asked Him to help me keep this orchard going. When I opened my eyes and looked around, I saw that Aunt Batty was right—God was right there beside me. The tree branches were His hands, reaching out to me—and He held the gift of an apple in every single one of them.

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One cool, fall morning the apple pickers began to arrive. At first I felt nervous about trying to manage the harvest all by myself, but then I started thinking about how smoothly the Bennett Brothers’ Circus

had run. I realized that no one person had tried to run that huge operation all alone, but everyone had worked together like a team, each person doing the job he did best. Some of my apple pickers had been coming to Wyatt Orchards for years and years and probably knew a lot more about it than I did, so I divvied up the work and paid the experienced ones a little bit extra to be my foremen. They thought of things I would have forgotten all about and kept me from making a lot of mistakes.

When it came time to take the apples to the open-air market, I thought about the fast-talking ballyhoo of the sideshow hawker with his *“Hurry, hurry...don’t miss your chance,”* and when I realized that those fast-talking apple buyers were putting on an act just like that hawker, I wasn’t afraid of them anymore. Aunt Peanut and Gloria the fat lady and Albert the albino had faced all those gawking people with strength and dignity, knowing they were just as good as the next fellow, so I stood tall and proud, too, when those buyers started gawking at me, a woman selling apples. I got the price I wanted and made enough money to pay my workers and buy the coal and other supplies my family would need for the winter. We didn’t have any extras, but thank God we had enough.

Once I’d sold the apples, I swallowed my pride and went over to talk to Alvin Greer and some of my other neighbors about working together to slaughter the pigs and pick the corn. I let my neighbors borrow some of Frank’s fancy equipment, and asked them for their advice about running things in return. Frank Wyatt had lived alone, worked alone, and died alone, and I made up my mind I would never be like him.

All through the harvest, Aunt Batty worked like a trooper right alongside me. The kids and I had all grown to love her, and since she’d retired from writing books, I begged her to stay with us and live with us and be our adopted grandmother. My daddy had never been

very good at telling me he loved me, but I remembered how I'd longed to hear him say it, and I started telling my kids I loved them—all the time. I told Aunt Batty, too.

Gradually, the pain I felt over losing Gabe began to heal—just as my grief had healed after Sam died. I still got an empty feeling whenever I went into the workshop where Gabe used to sleep, or whenever I saw Myrtle and her calf, or when I watched the boys push Becky on her swing. But I only thought about Gabe once or twice a day now, instead of once or twice every hour, so I knew that my grief was slowly easing. Maybe one of these days I wouldn't think about him at all.

Around Thanksgiving time, the strangest letter came in the mail one day from the United States Army in Washington, D.C. It was addressed to Frank Wyatt, but I tore it open and quickly scanned it to get the gist of it.

It said the government was very sorry to inform Frank, but his son Matthew Wyatt had died in the war after all, in the Battle of St. Mihiel. Some new information had come to light after all this time, which revealed that a mistake had been made. The army now had evidence to prove that Matthew Wyatt's remains had been erroneously identified as another man's and were laid to rest in a cemetery in France under the wrong name. The army regretted the mistake and any unnecessary grief this news might cause.

I said a little prayer before I showed the letter to Aunt Batty, knowing how much she had loved Matthew, and knowing she might take this news kind of hard. She looked up at me with tears in her eyes after she'd read it and said, "I think you'd better show this to John Wakefield right away, Toots. I think this is the answer to your prayers."

As I drove into town, I couldn't help but wonder if Gabe had something to do with this strange turn of events. I quickly pushed the

thought from my mind, though. I'd learned over the past few months to push all thoughts of Gabe aside as quickly as they came. The less I thought about him, the better off I was.

I found Mr. Wakefield working behind his desk in his cluttered office. "You look happier than I've seen you looking in a long time, Mrs. Wyatt," he said as he welcomed me in. "Are you bringing good news?"

"Well, I think so...In a way." I handed him the letter, then sat down to wait while he read it. He removed his spectacles when he finished and shook his head.

"What a pity. So often in my line of work I find that good news comes all wrapped up in the same package with tragic news...and that's true in this case, too, isn't it? Poor Matthew."

"I know. Aunt Batty told me so much about him that I almost feel as if I knew him...even though I never met him."

"Your husband's family has seen a great deal of tragedy, Mrs. Wyatt. Let's hope that it's all behind you now." His mournful, hound-dog face brightened a bit. "Because now that we have this letter, I'll finally be able to settle Frank's estate. The orchard is all yours, Eliza. Free and clear."

I jumped out of my chair and gave John Wakefield a big old hug.

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"I've found our Christmas tree," Aunt Batty announced a few days before Christmas. She'd been out tramping around in the snow-covered woods near Walter's Pond for the past couple of days, searching for one. "It's going to take all five of us to haul it home, though," she said, "so everybody dress warm. And Luke, we'll need to borrow your sled."

"Maybe Winky could pull it for us," Becky said, "like a reindeer!" Everyone laughed—except Winky.

There were six inches of snow on the ground, so the kids piled onto Luke's sled and rode it to the bottom of the hill, whooping and squealing all the way down. They waited beside the frozen pond for Aunt Batty and me to catch up with them.

"Oh, aren't the woods beautiful?" I said as we followed her into the grove of trees. The snow looked fresh and clean and white, and it sparkled in the sunlight like sequins on a circus costume. Winky picked up a trail of some kind and wandered into the bushes with his nose to the ground.

"I hope he's not going to rouse another skunk," Aunt Batty said. Against my will, I thought of Gabe and felt a wave of sadness.

"Hey, look! What kind of animal tracks are these?" Luke asked as he crouched beside the path.

"I have a book at home with pictures of all kinds of animal prints," Aunt Batty told him. "You boys study those carefully and remember what they look like so you can look them up when we get home."

"You sound just like a schoolmarm," I teased. "And you thought you'd never be one."

"Well, who would have ever thought!" She laughed, shaking her head.

We had walked a little further when Jimmy suddenly stopped. "Whoa, these are man-size footprints!" he said. We all huddled around to see. Jimmy was right—the trail of prints that led off into the bushes where Winky had disappeared were much too large to have been made by Aunt Batty's feet. I heard Winky barking in the distance.

"Probably another hobo," I said, "looking for firewood and a warm place to camp." Then I quickly changed the subject before someone mentioned Gabe. "This is a pretty little clearing, isn't it?" I asked. "We should come down here for a picnic next summer. So how much farther to this tree of yours, Aunt Batty?" The path was growing narrower, making it hard for Luke to pull his sled.

“That’s our Christmas tree right there,” she said, pointing. “Think you boys can chop it down for us?”

She let Jimmy and Luke take turns chopping, and by the time we’d all heaved and shoved that snow-covered pine tree onto the sled and up the hill to the house, we were all sticky with pitch and soaking wet from the snow that coated the branches. Aunt Batty made hot apple cider to warm us up. We set up the tree in the parlor and decorated it that night after supper using a box of ornaments I’d found in the attic.

“These decorations belonged to Lydia—your grandmother,” Aunt Batty explained to the kids as they unwrapped the shining glass balls from their tissue paper wrappings. “Your grandma was a beautiful woman and she loved beautiful things.” Aunt Batty sat on the sofa, stringing popcorn. Every time she dropped a piece, Winky gobbled it up.

“Oh, look, an angel,” I said, pulling it from the carton. “This should go on the very top, don’t you think? Come here, Becky, and I’ll boost you up.”

“We had a real angel come and stay with us and help us once, didn’t we?” she said as I lifted her in my arms. I thought about the night she’d poked Gabe in the hand with her fork to see if he was real and I smiled, even though my eyes filled with tears.

“Yes, we sure did. Like Aunt Batty said, God sends us His messengers to let us know that He cares about us.”

When we’d finished decorating the tree, the kids gathered around Aunt Batty as she read the Christmas story from the Bible. I sat in my rocking chair with fat old Queen Esther purring away on my lap and looked at my beautiful, crazy family. I’d had the idea that a family should be perfect, with a pretty mama and a handsome daddy and kids that were all sugary-sweet and dressed up real nice. A family couldn’t possibly have a chain-smoking chimpanzee, a clown for a daddy, and a midget for a mama. But as I looked at my three

ragamuffin kids in their hand-me-downs, at funny old Aunt Batty with her nutty ways, at our one-eyed hunting dog and two overweight cats with mittens for kittens, I was sure of two things—what I had with Daddy and Aunt Peanut was a family, and so was this. I loved every one of them. Wyatt Orchards wasn't my home, this house wasn't even my home. Home is where your family is—the people you love and who love you. And even if I lost everything I owned tomorrow, I'd still have riches beyond measure.

My thoughts made me so teary-eyed that I decided to take the scuttle full of cinders outside to empty it before someone noticed that I was crying. I needed to fetch one last pail of coal before heading up to bed, anyway.

My mind was a hundred miles away as I walked out onto the back porch, so when the large shape of a man suddenly emerged from the shadows it scared me half to death! I dropped the coal scuttle down the steps as I cried out.

"I'm sorry, Eliza!" a soft, familiar voice said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

*"Gabe?"*

It was him! The next moment I was in his arms, kissing him like I had on that frosty spring morning in the orchard more than six months ago. I thought I must be dreaming, but I felt the grip of his strong arms around me, felt the passion and warmth of his kiss, and I knew that Gabe was real. I also knew that my heart hadn't changed in the months he had been gone. I still loved him, plain and simple.

Gabe pulled away first and looked into my eyes. "I need to explain why I left, Eliza. I want to tell you everything this time. No more lies. My real name isn't Gabriel Harper. It's Matthew—"

*"No! Stop right there!"*

I freed myself from his arms. The joy I'd felt only seconds before turned to anger. I wouldn't let him deceive me a second time.

“I know very well you’re not Matthew Wyatt,” I said, seizing his right hand. “The real Matthew had part of his finger missing! The real Matthew Wyatt is dead!”

“I know he’s dead,” Gabe said softly. “He was my best friend...and he died saving my life. My name is Matthew Willis. My father is Edmund Willis, an attorney and political boss in Albany, New York. That’s where I grew up.”

He sounded sincere, but I was still wary of trusting him. I studied him as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. His hair needed to be trimmed again, and his chin had a day’s growth of beard on it. He looked tired—and worried.

“The sheriff said you tried to steal my brother-in-law’s name and his identity,” I said. “Is that true?”

“Yes, it’s true. I did ‘steal’ it, as you say. And I’d like to explain to you how and why that happened....But can we go inside first, where it’s warm? I’ve been standing out here for a couple of hours now, trying to get up the courage to knock on your door.” Gabe stood with his shoulders all hunched up and I could see him shivering, but I still hesitated.

“No. I don’t want you to come inside yet, Gabe. I don’t want my kids to know you’re here. You hurt them awfully bad when you left us like you did, without a word of apology or explanation.”

“But I want to explain it to them now—”

“No. You’ll have to explain it to me, first. Go build a fire in the workshop, and I’ll come out and hear your story after they’re in bed.”

It was hard not to let my excitement—or my fear—show as I went through the nightly routine of tucking my kids into bed. I could still feel Gabe’s lips on mine, his arms holding me tightly, and my heart wanted to soar like the Flying Falangas on their trapezes. But I warned my heart not to even shinny up that rope again until I’d heard Gabe’s story.



I tried to be real quiet as I put on my coat and boots to go back outside, but Winky waddled out to the kitchen and gave me away when he started barking. A moment later, Aunt Batty stuck her fluffy head out of her bedroom door. She looked at me curiously, and before I even had a chance to come up with an excuse for why I was going outside, she broke into a huge grin.

“Gabe’s back, isn’t he!” she said. I nodded sheepishly. “Oh, I just knew it! I could tell by the way Winky was barking this afternoon that those footprints belonged to someone he knew!” She gave me a quick hug, then said, “Well, don’t just stand there—go to him!”

I brought Winky with me. It wasn’t so much my choice as his. As soon as Winky saw Gabe sitting on the cot in the workshop he jumped into his arms and started licking him all over, his stubby tail whirling in happy circles. Gabe laughed—that deep, rumbling laugh that I loved so much—and at that moment he could have told me he was Al Capone or “Baby Face” Nelson and I wouldn’t have cared. But I had a feeling that I would hear the truth this time. I sat down on the chair across from him.

“I found your notebook in the stove,” I told him. “It didn’t burn up. Was that the true story of why you left home?”

“Yes. I enlisted in the army because I was ashamed of what I’d done to my father’s political opponent. I met Matthew Wyatt in basic training—we were bunkmates. People mixed us up all the time because we were about the same age and height, we both had dark hair and eyes, and we were both named Matthew. Even our last names, Wyatt and Willis, were similar. Of course, your brother-in-law was a lot stronger and more muscular than I was, since I was a city boy and he’d grown up on a farm. And he had lost part of his index finger.

“We spent a lot of time together,” Gabe continued, scratching Winky’s ears, “and we found out we had a lot more in common than

our first names. Our fathers may have lived in different places and worked in different professions, but in many ways they were the same man. And your brother-in-law and I had both enlisted to escape from our fathers—and to try to figure out who we really were.

“Matthew and I spent nearly two years together. We sailed to France on the same ship, spent several months in the same training camp, fought in the same battalion. The war changed both of us. I don’t think anybody can ever be the same after an experience like that. Matthew found out how homesick he was. He’d seen the world and he didn’t care for it. All he wanted in life was to go home and live on a farm again. He used to stop and gaze at the cows and horses as we marched past them, and he didn’t care if he got into trouble for it or not.

“I was glad that he’d figured out what he wanted to do after the war. I still had no idea what I would do. But then one day Matthew confided in me that he was illegitimate and that his father had disinherited him when he’d found out. Matthew knew that Wyatt Orchards would never be his. I was with him when he got Aunt Batty’s letter, telling him that his mother had died. I was with him in Paris when he typed the letter back to her. He wasn’t the same after that. He kept saying he had no reason to go back to Deer Springs, no mother or father and no home to return to. His mother’s death made him very depressed.

“But we were right in the thick of the war just then, and we were all depressed. We couldn’t imagine that we’d ever have a life again, that there was still a world of beauty and hope beyond all the horror and killing and death. I was just as depressed about my own future as Matthew was. I wanted to be a writer, but I didn’t think I deserved to be one after what I’d done to my father’s political opponent. I couldn’t return home any more than Matthew could. I knew the influence my father had over me, and I knew that if I went anywhere near Albany, I

would never have a life of my own. Matthew and I talked about our futures a lot, but we decided nothing mattered because we were both certain we would die in France. If a bullet didn't get us, then one of the diseases in the trenches surely would."

Gabe paused for a moment. "But we did live, through several major battles—Cantigny, Belleau Wood, and finally St. Mihiel. Too many men we knew did die in those battles, though...friends we'd lived with since boot camp. At St. Mihiel our bunker took a direct hit. There were six of us in there together, and four of our buddies died instantly. They were...well, one look and I knew they were all dead. I took a shrapnel hit in the chest—the scar you saw—and another hit in the gut. A falling sandbag had broken my leg.

"Matthew was wounded, too, but when he saw that I was still alive and couldn't walk, he made up his mind to get me to an aid station. Bombs and artillery shells and bullets were flying thick over our heads, but he carried me in his arms about a half mile back from the front lines. Everyone always called me 'Willis,' but that day Matthew kept calling me 'Willie.'

" 'Hang on, Willie...' he kept saying. 'You're not going to die, Willie. I'm not going to let you die.' I believe I would have died, too, if it hadn't been for him.

"Just before we reached the aid station, Matthew did a strange thing. He stopped and laid me down on the ground for a moment, and I saw him fumbling inside his uniform for something. Then he ripped open my shirt and I felt his hands near my chest wound. I didn't know what he was doing. I screamed for him not to touch the shrapnel sticking out. I was in so much pain that I was starting to go into shock. I felt him put something around my neck and I vaguely remember him saying that now I could start all over again. 'No one will care what happens to me, Willie. My mother is dead and no one else cares if I live or die.'

“He picked me up again and ran a few more yards. He told me he could see the aid station ahead and the medics running toward us with stretchers. Then he collapsed to the ground. He landed on top of me and I passed out from the pain. When I awoke, a doctor told me I had survived the field surgery, and that they were shipping me by train to a French hospital.

“ ‘What about my friend?’ I asked. ‘The one who saved my life?’ ”

“ ‘I’m very sorry,’ he told me. ‘Your friend had internal injuries— a ruptured spleen, massive bleeding...He died during surgery.’ ”

“For the next few weeks I was extremely ill. The wound in my gut had punctured my intestine, and peritonitis set in. When I recovered enough to be sent home to the States, they asked me to sign my separation papers. That’s when I saw the name they’d written on all my documents—Matthew Wyatt. I was going to correct their error, but then suddenly the memory came back to me of Matthew laying me on the ground, pulling something out from inside his shirt, slipping something around my neck. He had swapped dog tags with me.

“I knew why he’d done it. I didn’t want to return home to my father, and Matthew’s father would never welcome him home. I also realized that by this time my family had already received word that I was dead. I was still so angry with my father that I decided to play along with Matthew’s idea. Let my father mourn his only son’s death. It served him right. I would begin a new life with a new identity. I could be a writer now, and no one would ever know or care.

“They discharged me from the army hospital as Matthew Wyatt, born in Deer Springs to Lydia and Frank Wyatt. Whenever I published a story I used the pen name Gabriel Harper.

“At first I felt liberated by my new identity, but as time passed, I reached a point where I didn’t know who I was anymore. The loneliness of not having a family ate away at me, and I longed to see my mother and younger sisters again, my aunt June and my uncle and

cousins on the farm, the many friends I'd left behind in Albany. I was afraid to fall in love because I would have to be married under a false name, and then I didn't know if the marriage would even be legal. And what would my children's names be?

"My new friends in Chicago knew nothing at all about the real me, only the multitude of lies I'd told about myself. I saw what a mess I'd made, but I couldn't see a way out. Finally, in order to escape the guilt of living a lie, I left my new life behind, too, and rode the rails as a hobo.

"I knew exactly where I was going the night I came to Wyatt Orchards. I wanted to meet Frank and Sam Wyatt and see the place where Matthew had grown up. I'd started writing his story as if it were my own, and I was so confused about who I was and who he was that I thought maybe if I came here I could figure it all out. Besides, I told myself I owed it to Matthew to make sure his brother Sam was okay.

"But you know the rest, Eliza. Frank and Sam are both dead, and when I found out how badly you needed my help, I decided to stay. I needed to pay you back for saving my life—and to pay Matthew back, as well. And somewhere along the way I fell in love with you. I woke up delirious and the most incredible woman I'd ever met was holding me and crying with me. Becky and Luke kept calling me an angel, but I thought I'd died and you were the angel.

"When Sheriff Foster confronted me down at Aunt Batty's cottage and threatened to check up on me, I knew the masquerade was over. It was time to run. It was only a matter of time before the sheriff discovered my false identity. But I couldn't leave you, Eliza.

"The worst moment of all came the day I learned that my lies had prevented you and your kids from inheriting this place. Matthew was so sure his father had changed his will. Believe me, the last thing in the world I wanted to do was take this orchard away from you and

your kids. But that's what my lies had done.

"I wanted to explain all this to you but I didn't know how you would react. I decided to go to Washington and set the record straight, but first we had a crop to bring in. I kept hoping the sheriff wouldn't track me down until after the harvest, but it didn't work out that way. He came back to arrest me. After Aunt Batty warned me, I used the money I'd earned from my hobo story to go to Washington and turn myself in. I didn't know what the consequences would be, if I'd go to jail for impersonating Matthew Wyatt all this time or not, so I decided not to write to you or contact you until I'd cleared my name. I'd messed up your life enough with my lies. I couldn't involve you further.

"When I'd finally straightened out the mess in Washington, I went home to New York to see my family. They'd already received a letter from the army explaining the mistake, so they'd had time to get used to the idea of me returning from the grave. My father reacted pretty much the way I'd expected him to—he was furious that I'd deceived him. I couldn't make him understand why I'd done it. If he was happy to learn that his only son was alive after all these years, he never showed it. But it surprised me to discover that I no longer hated him. The months that I'd spent here with you and Aunt Batty changed me. I hadn't been able to tell you who I was, but I was finally figuring it out for myself.

"I'd always pictured God like my father, controlling and manipulating everyone. I thought I needed to earn His approval, and that I would never be quite good enough. But the day I hung up that swing for Becky, Aunt Batty pointed to it and said, 'That's just what our heavenly Father is like. He loves doing things to delight His children.' She and I talked while I worked on her cottage and she showed me how to find His forgiveness. That's why I could forgive my father...and myself."

Gabe leaned forward, kneading his strong hands together as he spoke. “I spent the happiest months of my life here, and I never wanted to leave. But I was afraid to come back, Eliza. I didn’t know if you could ever forgive me or not after I deserted you like I did. I love you, and I love your kids and Aunt Batty, and I’m so sorry that I hurt all of you. I wouldn’t blame you if you couldn’t forgive me, but—”

Gabe never had a chance to finish his sentence. I was in his arms, kissing him, telling him the best way I knew how that I loved him and that I forgave him.

The most wonderful Christmas present the kids and I could ever wish for had come home to live with us, for good.

# DEEL IX

## Wyatt-boorde

*Winter 1931-1932*

Van nou af sal al die dae van die aarde, saaityd en oestyd, koue en hitte,  
somer en winter, dag en nag nie ophou nie.

Genesis 8:22, 1953-vertaling



## ~ Hoofstuk negentien ~

Ek en tannie Batty sit by die kombuistafel toe die son die oggend opkom. Die koeie moet gemelk word, die perde moet voer en water kry en die seuns moet ontbyt eet en gereedmaak vir skool. Ek voel egter te moeg om te beweeg. Om ná al die jare my lewensverhaal te deel, laat my nou leeg en uitgeput voel. My ma het my verlaat en Sam het my verlaat, en nou is Gabe ook weg. Wat is fout met my wat almal hulle rug op my laat draai en van my af weggaan?

“Jy is baie geseënd om ouers te kon hê wat so lief is vir jou,” sê tannie Batty sag.

“Is Tannie mal?” vra ek. “Het Tannie nie gehoor wat ek sê nie? Pappa het nie een keer vir my gesê hy is lief vir my nie, en Mamma het dit alewig gesê, maar my toe verlaat.”

“Jy staan te naby om dit te sien soos dit regtig is, Toots. Jou pa het op honderd verskillende maniere gewys hoe lief hy jou het.”

“Hoe? Noem een.”

“Hy het jou besluite gerig, jou volgens die Goeie Boek grootgemaak, jou kerk toe gevat. Hy het seker gemaak jy word nie ’n sirkus-aardigheid nie, maar eerder ’n warm, liefdevolle vrou wat die mens kon word wat God wil hê jy moet wees. Bo alles het hy jou laat gaan toe die tyd daarvoor aangebreek het. Hy het alles gedoen wat ’n goeie ouer behoort te doen. Dit is hoekom jy vandag self so ’n wonderlike ouer is. Jy het by jou pa geleer hoe om lief te hê.”

“Maar hy het vir my oor my mamma gekok.”

“Is jy seker daaroor?” vra sy sag.

Wanneer ek daaroor nadink, moet ek erken dat Pappa nooit gesê het Mamma is dood nie. Ek staan stadig op en maak een van die stoofplate oop sodat ek nog ’n stuk hout op die vuur kan sit. “Wel, ek is seker dat my ma my verlaat het,” sê ek en maak die plaat weer toe.

Tannie Batty staan ook op en maak die kas oop. Sy hou aan gesels terwyl sy die tafel vir ontbyt dek. “Dit lyk vir my of jou ma geweet het sy kan nie behoorlik vir jou sorg nie, en sy was lief genoeg vir jou om jou vir iemand te gee wat dit wel kon doen. My suster het ook haar eie kans op geluk prysgegee ter wille van haar kind. Jy weet tog alles omtrent daardie soort moederliefde, of hoe, Eliza? Kyk maar net hoe hard jy die afgelope ruk gewerk het om hierdie boord te behou en vir jou kinders te voorsien. Jou ma het jou nie

sommerso verlaat nie, Toots. Sy het die grootste opoffering gemaak wat 'n ma kan maak.”

Ek kyk hoe tannie Batty borde op die tafel sit en sien dat sy een te veel uitgehaal het. Sy wil dit op Gabe se plek neersit, maar keer haarself.

“Gabe het my verlaat,” sê ek en stry teen die trane.

“Wel, dit lyk dalk nou so,” sê sy. “Gabe is egter lief vir almal van ons. Hy het dalk 'n goeie rede vir dit wat hy gedoen het. Hy het dalk ook 'n opoffering gemaak vir die mense wat hy liefhet.”

“Ha! Ek twyfel daaraan. Van wat sheriff Foster gesê het, lyk dit vir my of Gabe sy eie bas probeer red het om te keer dat hy gearresteer word.”

Tannie Batty antwoord nie. Sy sit eetgerei by elke plek neer en gooi melk in die kinders se glase terwyl ek die pan uithaal en eiers in 'n bak begin breek om dit te klits. Toe ek besef dat ek net soos tannie Batty verkeerd getel en genoeg eiers gebruik het sodat Gabe ook kan eet, bedek ek my gesig met my hande.

“Wat gaan ek sonder hom doen?” huil ek.

Tannie Batty sit haar arms om my. “Jy het nog die hele tyd staatgemaak op Gabe se hulp,” sê sy sag, “in plaas van God s'n. Hy weet egter hoe jy voel. Jesus het die pyn van verlatenheid ervaar toe Hy vir ons aan die kruis gehang het. Hy het uitgeroep: ‘My God, my God, waarom het U My verlaat?’ Hy het daardie offer gebring sodat Hy vir sy kinders kan sê: ‘Ek sal julle nooit verlaat, julle nooit in die steek laat nie.’ Wanneer almal weg is, Eliza, is God steeds hier.”

Sy lei my terug na 'n stoel toe en laat my sit. Dan maak sy die eiers gaar. “God het geweet dit is tyd vir Gabe om te gaan,” sê sy, “net soos Hy geweet het toe dit tyd was vir Walter om te gaan. God het dit gedoen sodat ek en jy albei na Hom moet draai vir krag en om die krag te ontdek wat Hy nog die hele tyd binne-in ons opgebou het. Kyk terug oor jou lewe, Toots, en dink aan al die ervarings wat God vir jou gegee het – die goeies en die slegtes – en jy sal sien hoe Hy jou gevorm het tot die vrou wat jy vandag is. Aanvaar daardie ervarings as sy daaglikse brood. Dank Hom daarvoor. Wees dan die mens wat Hy jou geskep het om te wees. Die feit dat jy sonder 'n permanente huis grootgeword het, sal vir jou die dryfkrag en vasberadenheid gee wat jy nodig het om hierdie plek te bestuur ... Jou vaardighede as bal-akrobaat kan ook handig te pas kom.”

Tannie Batty glimlag toe sy die gebreekte eierdoppe tussen haar hande probeer gooi, en ek lag toe dit op die tafel val. Sy giggel saam met my.

“Sal jy my leer hoe om dit te doen, Toots?” vra sy.

“Natuurlik, tannie Batty.”

Sy roer die eiers in die pan vinnig, haal dan 'n brood uit die broodblik en begin dit sny om roosterbrood te maak. “Luister,” sê sy, “al die probleme wat jy die afgelope ruk beleef, is nie God se straf nie. Hy wil dit gebruik om jou nader aan Hom te bring, net soos jou ma se siekte – wat 'n vreeslike tragedie is – jou gedwing het om nader aan jou pa te leef.”

Ek vee die trane uit my oë en staan op om haar te help. “Ek het die afgelope paar jaar nie regtig aan God gedink nie,” sê ek. “Die manier waarop my skoonpa oor God gepraat het, het Hom na iemand laat lyk wat ek nie regtig wou ken nie.”

“Dit is omdat Frank die Bybel gelees en kerk toe gegaan het, maar hy het nie vir God geken nie. Hy het net godsdiens gehad. Eliza, dit is goed dat jy van die Bybel weet en dat jou pa jou kerk toe gevat het, maar jy moet vir God leer ken.”

“Hoe doen ek dit?”

“Vra Hom vir hulp wanneer jy dit nodig het. Praat met Hom oor dinge soos jy altyd met jou tannie Peanut of met Gabe gepraat het. Jy moet leer om God te vertrou om jou te vang wanneer dit voel of jy gaan val, net soos daardie akrobate mekaar vertrou het. God is dalk groot en sterk, maar Hy sal jou nooit verbysel nie. Alles wat God in ons lewe doen, is volmaak, selfs al lyk dit op die oog af nie altyd so nie. Jou vreemde sirkusvriende het jou dit geleer.”

“Ek mis hulle almal so baie,” sê ek. “Hulle was my familie en ek kon vir jare lank nie eens oor hulle praat nie.”

“Jy sal vir Gabe ook mis,” sê sy en sit haar hand op my skouer. “Ons almal sal. Maar selfs al was Gabe nog hier, kan hy ook nie in al jou behoeftes voorsien nie. Net God kan dit doen. Gabe kon jou met die werk in die boorde help, maar net God kan die appels laat groei.”

Later die oggend gaan stap ek in die boord. Ek weet dit is hoog tyd dat ek met God praat. Ek vertel Hom alles waaroor ek jammer is, alles waarvoor ek bang is, en ek vra Hom om my te help om die boord aan die gang te hou. Toe ek my oë oopmaak en om my rondkyk, sien ek dat tannie Batty reg was – God is hier by my. Die boomtakke is sy hande wat uitreik na my – en Hy hou die geskenk van 'n appel in elke liewe een.

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Vroeg een herfsoggend begin die appelplukkers opdaag. Ek voel aan die begin senuweeagtig om die oes heeltemal op my eie te behartig, maar dan dink ek aan hoe glad die Bennett Brothers-sirkus gewerk het. Ek besef nie net een

enkele persoon het daardie groot besigheid alleen probeer bestuur nie, maar almal het saamgewerk soos 'n span en elke persoon het sy werk na die beste van sy vermoë gedoen. Party van my appelplukkers kom al jare lank na Wyatt-boorde toe en weet waarskynlik baie meer van appels pluk as ek. Ek deel toe die werk op en betaal die ervare plukkers 'n bietjie meer om my voormanne te wees. Hulle dink aan goed waarvan ek heeltemal vergeet het en keer dat ek 'n groot klomp foute maak.

Toe dit tyd word om die appels na die opelugmark te vat, dink ek aan die gladdemond smous se lawaai wanneer hy kaartjies vir die byvertonings probeer verkoop het met sy *“Vinnig maak ... moenie jou kans laat verbygaan nie”*, en toe ek besef dat die gladdemond appelkopers net soos daardie smous 'n front voorhou, is ek nie meer bang vir hulle nie. Tannie Peanut en Gloria die vet vrou en Albert die albino het al daardie starende mense met krag en waardigheid in die oë gekyk, wetend dat hulle net so goed is soos enigiemand anders. Daarom staan ek ook fier en regop wanneer die verkopers my aangaap; 'n vrou wat appels verkoop. Ek kry die prys waarvoor ek vra en verdien genoeg geld om my werkers te betaal en steenkool en ander voorrade te koop wat my gesin in die winter sal nodig hê. Ons het geen ekstras nie, maar ek dank God, want ons het genoeg.

Nadat ek die appels verkoop het, sluk ek my trots en gaan praat met Alvin Greer en 'n paar van my ander bure. Ek vra of ons saam kan werk om die varke te slag en die mielies te oes. Ek laat my bure toe om van Frank se luukse toerusting te gebruik en vra hulle dan in ruil vir advies oor hoe om dinge te bestuur. Frank Wyatt het alleen geleef, alleen gewerk, alleen gesterf, en ek is vasbeslote om nooit soos hy te wees nie.

Regdeur die oestyd werk tannie Batty sy aan sy saam met my. Ek en die kinders het lief geword vir haar en aangesien sy nie langer boeke skryf nie, smee ek haar om by ons te bly en ons aangenome ouma te wees. My pappa was nooit goed daarmee om vir my te sê dat hy my liefhet nie, maar ek onthou hoe graag ek hom dit wou hoor sê. Daarom begin ek vir my kinders sê ek het hulle lief, en ek sê dit vir tannie Batty ook.

Die pyn oor Gabe begin mettertyd vervaag, net soos my smart ná Sam se dood genees het. Ek kry steeds 'n gevoel van eensaamheid wanneer ek in die werkswinkel is waar Gabe geslaap het, of wanneer ek vir Myrtle en haar kalf sien, of wanneer ek kyk hoe die seuns vir Becky op haar swaai stoot. In plaas van een of twee keer elke uur, dink ek nou net een of twee keer 'n dag aan Gabe; daarom weet ek my hart is besig om te genees. Daar sal dalk binnekort 'n dag kom dat ek glad nie aan hom dink nie.

Rondom Thanksgiving kry ek eendag die vreemdste brief in die pos vanuit

Washington, D.C., van die Verenigde State se weermag. Dit is aan Frank Wyatt gerig, maar ek skeur dit vinnig oop en lees dit vlugtig.

Die brief sê die regering is baie jammer om Frank in te lig, maar sy seun Matthew Wyatt is toe wel in die oorlog dood, in die slag van St. Mihiel. Hulle het ná al die jare nuwe inligting gekry wat wys dat hulle 'n fout gemaak het. Die weermag het nou bewyse dat Matthew Wyatt se oorskot per ongeluk as 'n ander man s'n geïdentifiseer is en onder 'n verkeerde naam in 'n begraafplaas in Frankryk ter ruste gelê is. Die weermag vra om verskoning vir die fout en ook vir enige onnodige smart wat dié nuus kan meebring.

Ek stuur 'n klein gebedjie op voordat ek die brief vir tannie Batty wys, want ek weet hoe lief sy vir Matthew was en ook dat sy die nuus dalk moeilik sal hanteer. Nadat sy dit gelees het, kyk sy na my met trane in haar oë en sê: “Ek dink jy moet dit dadelik vir John Wakefield gaan wys, Toots. Ek dink dit is die antwoord op jou gebede.”

Terwyl ek inry dorp toe, kan ek nie help om te wonder of Gabe dalk iets met hierdie nuwe wending te doen het nie. Ek stoot egter vinnig die gedagte opsy. Ek het die afgelope paar maande geleer om alle gedagtes aan Gabe so gou moontlik opsy te skuif. Hoe minder ek aan hom dink, hoe beter is dit vir my.

Ek kry meneer Wakefield in sy kantoor waar hy by sy lessenaar sit en werk. “Jy lyk gelukkiger as wat ek jou in 'n lang tyd gesien het, mevrou Wyatt,” sê hy toe hy my na binne nooi. “Bring jy goeie nuus?”

“Wel, ek dink so ... op 'n manier.” Ek gee vir hom die brief en gaan sit om te wag terwyl hy dit lees. Hy haal sy bril af toe hy klaar gelees het en skud sy kop.

“Wat 'n jammerte. Dit gebeur so dikwels in my beroep dat goeie nuus in dieselfde pakkie toegedraai as tragiese nuus kom ... en dit is ook waar in hierdie geval, of hoe? Arme Matthew.”

“Ek weet. Tannie Batty het my so baie van hom vertel dat dit byna voel of ek hom ken ... selfs al het ek hom nooit ontmoet nie.”

“Jou man se gesin het baie tragedie beleef, mevrou Wyatt. Kom ons hoop dit alles is nou agter jou.” Sy droewige bloedhond-gesig helder 'n klein bietjie op. “Noudat ons hierdie brief het, kan ek uiteindelik Frank se boedel afhandel. Die boord is nou joune, Eliza.”

Ek spring uit my stoel op en gee vir John Wakefield 'n stewige drukkies.

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“Ek het ons Kersboom gekry,” kondig tannie Batty ’n paar dae voor Kersfees aan. Sy soek al die afgelope paar dae in die sneeubedekte bome naby Walter se dam na een. “Al vyf van ons sal egter moet saamwerk om dit by die huis te kry,” sê sy, “so julle moet warm aantrek. En Luke, ons gaan jou slee nodig hê.”

“Dalk kan Winky dit vir ons trek,” sê Becky, “net soos ’n takbok.” Almal lag, behalwe Winky.

Die sneeu lê ongeveer vyftien sentimeter dik en al drie kinders klim op Luke se slee en ry teen die heuwel af terwyl hulle al die pad ondertoe skree en lag. Hulle wag langs die gevriesde dam vir my en tannie Batty om hulle in te haal.

“Sjoe, maar die woud lyk mooi,” sê ek toe ek haar tussen die bome in volg. Die sneeu lyk vars en skoon en wit, en dit glinster in die sonlig soos blinkers op ’n sirkuskostuum. Winky kry die een of ander reuk en stap tussen die bosse in met sy neus teen die grond.

“Ek hoop hy gaan nie weer ’n muishond uitsnuffel nie,” sê tannie Batty. Ek dink onwillekeurig aan Gabe en voel skielik hartseer.

“Hei, kyk! Watter dier se spore is dit dié?” vra Luke toe hy langs die voetpaadjie kniel.

“Ek het ’n boek by die huis met allerhande soorte diere se spore in,” sê tannie Batty vir hom. “Kyk julle seuns nou mooi daarna en onthou hoe dit lyk sodat ons dit kan opsoek wanneer ons by die huis kom.”

“Tannie klink net soos ’n skooljuffrou,” terg ek. “En Tannie het gedink Tannie sal nooit een wees nie.”

“Wel, wie sou dit nou kon raai!” Sy lag en skud haar kop.

Ons stap nog ’n entjie verder toe Jimmy skielik vassteek. “Wag ’n bietjie, dit is ’n mens se voetspore,” sê hy. Ons almal staan nader om te kyk. Jimmy is reg. Die ry voetspore wat na die bosse lei waarheen Winky verdwyn het, is heeltemal te groot om tannie Batty se voetspore te wees. Ek hoor Winky in die verte blaf.

“Seker nog ’n boemelaar,” sê ek, “wat hout vir vuur en ’n warm plek soek om te kamp.” Dan verander ek vinnig die onderwerp voordat enigiemand oor Gabe praat. “Dit is ’n mooi oop stukkie veld hierdie, of hoe?” vra ek. “Ons moet volgende somer hier kom piekniek hou. Hoeveel verder is daardie boom nog, tannie Batty?” Die paadjie word al nouer en dit word moeiliker vir Luke om sy slee te trek.

“Dit is ons Kersboom dié,” sê sy en wys met haar vinger. “Kan julle seuns dit vir ons afkap?”

Sy laat Jimmy en Luke beurte maak om te kap en teen die tyd dat ons almal

gestoei en gespook het om die sneeubedekte denneboom op die slee en teen die heuwel op by die huis te kry, is ons almal taai en sopnat van die sneeu wat op die takke was. Tannie Batty maak warm appelsider om ons te help ontdooi. Ons maak die boom in die voorkamer staan en versier dit die aand ná ete met ornamente wat ek in 'n boks in die solder gekry het.

“Hierdie versierings was Lydia s’n. Sy was julle ouma,” verduidelik tannie Batty aan die kinders terwyl hulle die blink glasballe uit die sneespapier haal. “Julle ouma was ’n pragtige vrou en sy was lief vir mooi goed.” Tannie Batty sit op die bank en springmielies inryg. Elke keer wanneer sy ’n stukkie laat val, eet Winky dit vinnig op.

“Kyk net, ’n engel,” sê ek en haal dit uit die kartondoos uit. “Dit moet heel bo kom. Kom hier, Becky, dan tel ek jou op.”

“Ons het mos eenkeer ’n regte engel gehad wat gekom het om ons te help, nè?” sê sy toe ek haar in my arms optel. Ek dink aan die aand toe sy vir Gabe met haar vurk op die hand gestee het om te kyk of hy regtig is. Ek glimlag, al skiet my oë vol tranes.

“Ja, ons het. Dit is soos tannie Batty gesê het. God stuur sy boodskappers om vir ons te wys dat Hy vir ons omgee.”

Toe ons die boom klaar versier het, kom sit die kinders by tannie Batty terwyl sy die Kersverhaal uit die Bybel voorlees. Ek sit op my skommelstoel met die vet Queen Esther wat op my skoot lê en spin, en kyk na my pragtige, mallerige gesin. Ek het altyd die idee gehad dat ’n gesin perfek moet wees met ’n mooi mamma en ’n aantreklike pappa en kinders wat stroopsoet en netjies aangetrek is. ’n Gesin kan tog nie ’n sjimpansee hê wat soos ’n skoorsteen rook met ’n nar vir ’n pa en ’n dwerg vir ’n ma nie. Maar waar ek nou na my drie flenterkinders in hulle tweedehandse klere en snaakse ou tannie Batty en haar vreemde maniere kyk, na ons eenoog-jaghond en twee oorgewig katte met handskoene vir kleintjies, is ek seker van twee dinge: Wat ek saam met Pappa en tannie Peanut gehad het, was ’n gesin, en dit wat ek hier sien, is ook. Ek is lief vir elkeen van hulle. Wyatt-boorde is nie my tuiste nie, hierdie huis is nie eens my tuiste nie. My tuiste is waar my gesin is – die mense wat ek liefhet en wat vir my lief is. En selfs al verloor ek môre alles wat ek besit, sal ek steeds skatryk wees.

My gedagtes maak my so huilerig dat ek besluit om die kolebak buitetoete vat en die as uit te gooi voordat iemand sien ek huil. Ek moet in elk geval nog steenkool gaan haal voordat ek kan opgaan bed toe.

My gedagtes is myle ver toe ek op die agterstoep uitstap. Toe die groot figuur van ’n man dus skielik vanuit die skaduwees te voorskyn kom, skrik ek my byna dood. Ek laat val die kolebak toe ek verskrik gil.

“Ek is jammer, Eliza,” sê ’n sagte, bekende stem. “Ek wou jou nie skrik maak nie.”

“Gabe?”

Dit is hy! Die volgende oomblik is ek in sy arms en soen hom net soos daardie koue oggend in die boord meer as ses maande gelede. Ek dink ek droom, maar ek voel die greep van sy sterk arms om my, voel die passie en hitte van sy soen, en ek weet Gabe is regtig hier. Ek weet ook my hart het nie verander in die maande wat hy weg was nie. Ek is steeds lief vir hom; dis so duidelik soos daglig.

Gabe staan eerste terug en kyk my vas in die oë. “Ek moet verduidelik hoekom ek hier weg is, Eliza. Ek wil hierdie keer vir jou alles vertel. Geen leuens meer nie. My regte naam is nie Gabriel Harper nie. Dit is Matthew – ”

“Néé. Hou net daar op.”

Ek maak myself uit sy arms los. Die vreugde wat ek oomblikke tevore beleef het, verander in woede. Ek sal nie toelaat dat hy my ’n tweede keer bedrieg nie.

“Ek weet baie goed jy is nie Matthew Wyatt nie,” sê ek en vat sy regterhand. “Die regte Matthew kort ’n deel van sy vinger. Die regte Matthew Wyatt is dood.”

“Ek weet hy is dood,” sê Gabe sag. “Hy was my beste vriend ... en hy is dood omdat hy my lewe gered het. My naam is Matthew Willis. My pa is Edmund Willis, ’n prokureur en politieke grootkop in Albany, New York. Dit is waar ek grootgeword het.”

Hy klink opreg, maar ek is steeds bang om hom te vertrou. Ek kyk stip na hom namate my oë aan die donker gewoond raak. Sy hare kort al weer ’n sny en sy baard is ’n dag se groei lank. Hy lyk moeg – en bekommerd.

“Die sheriff het gesê jy het my swaer se naam en sy identiteit probeer steel,” sê ek. “Is dit waar?”

“Ja, dit is waar. Ek het dit ‘gesteel’, soos jy dit stel. Ek wil graag aan jou verduidelik hoe en hoekom dit gebeur het ... Kan ons eers ingaan na waar dit warm is? Ek staan nou al ’n paar ure hierbuite en probeer genoeg moed bymekaarskraap om aan jou deur te klop.” Gabe staan met sy skouers opgetrek en ek kan sien hoe hy bewee, maar ek aarsel steeds.

“Nee. Ek wil nog nie hê jy moet inkom nie, Gabe. Ek wil nie hê my kinders moet weet jy is hier nie. Jy het hulle baie seergemaak toe jy sommerso hier weg is, sonder ’n woord of verduideliking.”

“Maar ek wil dit nou aan hulle verduidelik – ”

“Nee. Jy sal dit eers aan my moet verduidelik. Gaan maak vuur in die werkswinkel en ek sal uitkom en na jou storie luister nadat ek hulle in die bed



gesit het.”

Dit is moeilik om my opwinding – en my vrees – te onderdruk terwyl ek deur die aand se roetine gaan van my kinders in die bed sit. Ek voel steeds Gabe se lippe op myne, sy arms wat my styf vashou, en my hart wil sweef soos die Falangas met hulle sweefstokke. Ek waarsku egter my hart om nie weer met die tou op te klim totdat ek Gabe se storie gehoor het nie.

Ek probeer baie saggies my jas en stewels aantrek sodat ek buitetoë kan gaan, maar Winky kom by die kombuis in en gee my weg toe hy begin blaf. ’n Oomblik later steek tannie Batty haar grys krulkop by haar kamer se deur uit. Sy kyk nuuskierig na my en voordat ek ’n kans het om ’n verskoning uit te dink oor hoekom ek buitetoë moet gaan, glimlag sy breed.

“Gabe is terug, nè?” sê sy. Ek knik verleë. “O, ek het dit geweet. Ek kon agterkom aan die manier waarop Winky vanmiddag geblaf het dat daardie voetspore aan iemand behoort wat hy ken.” Sy druk my vinnig en sê dan: “Wel, moenie net daar staan nie ... Gaan na hom toe.”

Ek vat Winky saam met my. Dit is eintlik meer sy keuse as myne. Die oomblik toe Winky vir Gabe op die bed in die werkswinkel sien sit, spring hy tot in sy arms en lek sy gesig terwyl sy stomp stertjie gelukkig al in die rondte waai. Gabe lag – daardie diep lag van hom waarvoor ek so lief is – en op daardie oomblik kan hy my maar vertel hy is Al Capone of “Baby Face” Nelson en ek sal nie eens omgee nie. Ek kry egter die gevoel dat ek hierdie keer die waarheid gaan hoor. Ek gaan sit oorkant hom op die stoel.

“Ek het jou notaboek in die stofie gekry,” sê ek vir hom. “Dit het nie verbrand nie. Is dit die ware verhaal oor hoekom jy by die huis weg is?”

“Ja. Ek het by die weermag aangesluit, want ek was skaam oor wat ek aan my pa se politieke opponent gedoen het. Ek het Matthew Wyatt tydens ons basiese opleiding ontmoet; ons het ’n stapelbed gedeel. Mense het die hele tyd deurmekaar geraak met wie van ons wie is, want ons is omtrent ewe oud en ewe lank, ons albei het donker hare en oë, en ons al twee se naam is Matthew. Selfs ons vanne, Wyatt en Willis, het dieselfde geklink. Jou swaer was natuurlik baie sterker en meer gespierd as ek, want ek was ’n stadsjapie en hy het op die plaas grootgeword. Hy het ook ’n deel van sy wysvinger verloor.

“Ons het baie tyd saam deurgebring,” gaan Gabe voort terwyl hy Winky se ore vryf, “en ons het uitgevind ons het baie meer gemeen as net ons name. Ons pa’s het dalk op verskillende plekke geleef en het verskillende beroepe gehad, maar hulle was in baie opsigte dieselfde man. Ek en jou swaer het ook albei by die weermag aangesluit om van ons pa af weg te kom, en te probeer uitpluis wie ons regtig is.

“Ek en Matthew het byna twee jaar saam deurgebring. Ons het op dieselfde

skip Frankryk toe gevaar, 'n paar maande in dieselfde opleidingskamp deurgebring en in dieselfde bataljon oorlog gevoer. Die oorlog het ons albei verander. Ek dink nie enigiemand kan ooit dieselfde wees ná so 'n ervaring nie. Matthew het begin besef hoe baie hy huis toe verlang. Hy het die wêreld gesien en dit het hom nie beïndruk nie. Al wat hy in die lewe wou hê, was om huis toe te gaan en weer op 'n plaas te bly. Hy het dikwels gaan staan en na die beeste en perde gestaar wanneer ons verby hulle moes marsjeer, en hy het nie omgee as hy daaroor in die moeilikheid beland het nie.

“Ek was bly dat hy ontdek het wat hy ná die oorlog wil doen. Ek het nog steeds geen idee gehad wat ek sou doen nie. Toe het Matthew my eendag in sy vertroue geneem en my vertel dat hy 'n buite-egtelike kind is en dat sy pa hom onterf het toe hy dit uitgevind het. Matthew het geweet Wyatt-boorde sal nooit syne wees nie. Ek was by hom toe hy tannie Batty se brief gekry het wat sê dat sy ma oorlede is. Ek was by hom in Parys toe hy die brief vir haar getik het. Hy was daarna nie meer dieselfde nie. Hy het aanhoudend gesê hy het geen rede om terug te gaan Deer Springs toe nie; nie 'n ma of 'n pa of 'n huis om na terug te keer nie. Sy ma se dood het hom baie depressief gemaak.

“Ons was egter reg in die middel van die oorlog en ons almal was depressief. Ons kon ons nie indink dat ons ooit weer 'n lewe sou hê nie; dat daar nog 'n wêreld vol skoonheid en hoop anderkant die gruwels en dood was nie. Ek was net so depressief oor my eie toekoms as wat Matthew oor syne was. Ek wou 'n skrywer wees, maar ek het nie gedink ek verdien dit om een te wees ná wat ek aan my pa se politieke opponent gedoen het nie. Ek kon net so min soos Matthew teruggaan huis toe. Ek het geweet watter invloed my pa oor my het en as ek enigsins naby aan Albany sou kom, sou ek nooit my eie lewe kon lei nie. Ek en Matthew het baie oor ons toekoms gepraat, maar ons het besluit niks daarvan maak saak nie, want ons was seker dat ons al twee in Frankryk sou sterf. As dit nie 'n koeël was nie, sou een van die siektes in die loopgrawe dit doen.”

Gabe bly vir 'n oomblik stil. “Ons het egter 'n hele paar groot veldslae oorleef – Cantigny, Belleau Wood en uiteindelik St. Mihiel. Te veel manne wat ons geken het, is in daardie veldslae dood ... vriende wat ons sedert ons basiese opleiding geken het. By St. Mihiel is ons bunker direk getref. Daar was ses van ons daarbinne en vier van ons kamerade is dadelik dood. Hulle was ... wel, een kyk en ek het geweet hulle almal is dood. Skrapnel het my in die bors getref – dit is die litteken wat jy gesien het – en ek het ook 'n wond in my maag gehad. 'n Vallende sandsak het ook my been gebreek.

“Matthew is ook gewond, maar toe hy sien dat ek nog leef en nie kan loop nie, het hy besluit hy gaan my by 'n noodhulpstasie kry. Bomme en mortiere

en koeëls het van alle kante oor ons koppe gevlieg, maar hy het my ongeveer 'n kilometer ver van die voorste linie af in sy arms gedra. Almal het my altyd 'Willis' genoem, maar daardie dag het Matthew my die hele tyd 'Willie' genoem.

“Byt vas, Willie ...” het hy aanhou sê. ‘Jy sal nie doodgaan nie, Willie. Ek sal dit nie toelaat nie.’ Ek glo ek sou ook gesterf het as dit nie vir hom was nie.

“Net voordat ons by die noodhulpstasie kon kom, het Matthew 'n vreemde ding gedoen. Hy het gaan staan en my vir 'n oomblik op die grond neergelê. Ek het gesien hy soek in sy uniform na iets. Toe skeur hy my hemp oop en ek voel sy hande naby die wond in my bors. Ek het nie geweet wat hy doen nie. Ek het geskree dat hy nie aan die skrapnel moet raak wat nog uitsteek nie. Ek het soveel pyn gehad dat ek in 'n skoktoestand begin ingaan het. Ek het gevoel hy sit iets om my nek en ek kan vaagweg onthou dat hy gesê het ek kan nou van voor af begin. ‘Niemand sal omgee oor wat van my word nie, Willie. My ma is dood en niemand anders gee om of ek lewe of sterf nie.’

“Hy het my weer opgetel en nog 'n ent gehardloop. Hy het vir my gesê hy sien die noodhulpstasie voor ons en die mediese ouens wat met hulle draagbare na ons toe kom. Toe sak hy op die grond neer. Hy het bo-op my geval en ek het bewusteloos geword van die pyn. Toe ek wakker word, het 'n dokter vir my gesê ek het die veldoperasie oorleef en dat hulle my per trein na 'n Franse hospitaal stuur.

“‘Wat van my vriend?’ het ek gevra. ‘Die een wat my lewe gered het?’

“‘Ek is baie jammer,’ het hy vir my gesê. ‘Jou vriend het inwendige beserings gehad – 'n gebarste milt, baie bloeding ... Hy is tydens die operasie oorlede.’

“Ek was die volgende paar weke baie siek. Die skrapnel in my maag het deur my ingewande gestee en buikvliesontsteking veroorsaak. Toe ek genoeg herstel het om teruggestuur te word Amerika toe het hulle my gevra om my skeidingspapiere te teken. Dit is toe dat ek die naam sien wat hulle op al my dokumente geskryf het – Matthew Wyatt. Ek wou hulle op die fout wys, maar toe onthou ek skielik hoe Matthew my op die grond neergesit, iets uit sy eie hemp gehaal en dit om my nek gehang het. Hy het ons identiteitsplaatjies omgeruil.

“Ek weet hoekom hy dit gedoen het. Ek wou nie teruggaan na my pa toe nie, en Matthew se pa sou hom nie tuis verwelkom het nie. Ek het ook besef dat my familie teen hierdie tyd laat weet is dat ek dood is. Ek was nog steeds so kwaad vir my pa dat ek besluit het om in te val by Matthew se plan. Laat my pa oor sy enigste seun se dood rou. Dit is wat hy verdien. Ek sal 'n nuwe

lewe met 'n nuwe identiteit begin. Ek kon nou 'n skrywer wees en niemand sou ooit weet of omgee nie.

“Hulle het my uit die hospitaal ontslaan as Matthew Wyatt, in Deer Springs gebore as die seun van Lydia en Frank Wyatt. Wanneer ek 'n storie gepubliseer het, het ek altyd die naam Gabriel Harper gebruik.

“Aan die begin ek bevry gevoel deur my nuwe identiteit, maar namate die tyd verbygegaan het, het ek die punt bereik waar ek nie meer geweet het wie ek is nie. Die eensaamheid van geen familie nie het aan my geknaag en ek het daarna verlang om weer my ma en jonger susters te sien, my tannie June en my oom en neefs en niggies op die plaas, die baie vriende wat ek in Albany agtergelaat het. Ek was bang om verlief te raak, want dan sou ek onder 'n vals naam trou en ek weet nie of die huwelik dan wettig sou wees nie. Wat sou my kinders se van dan wees?

“My nuwe vriende in Chicago het niks van my ware self geweet nie, net die magdom leuens wat ek oor myself vertel het. Ek het gesien wat 'n gemors ek van alles gemaak het, maar ek kon geen uitweg sien nie. Ten einde van die skuldgevoelens van my vals lewe af weg te kom, het ek besluit om ook my nuwe lewe agter te laat en per trein te reis as 'n boemelaar.

“Die aand toe ek hier by Wyatt-boorde aangekom het, het ek presies geweet waarheen ek op pad is. Ek wou vir Frank en Sam Wyatt ontmoet en die plek sien waar Matthew grootgeword het. Ek het sy verhaal begin skryf asof dit my eie is en ek was so verward oor wie ek is en wie hy was dat ek gedink ek kan alles uitpluis deur hierheen te kom. Ek het myself ook vertel ek is dit aan Matthew verskuldig om seker te maak sy broer Sam is oukei.

“Jy ken die res, Eliza. Frank en Sam is albei dood, en toe ek sien hoe dringend jy my hulp nodig het, het ek besluit om te bly. Ek moes jou vergoed omdat jy my lewe gered het, en ek moes ook vir Matthew daarvoor vergoed. Iewers deur dit alles het ek verlief geraak op jou. Ek het ylend wakker geword en die wonderlikste vrou wat ek nog ooit ontmoet het, het my vasgehou en saam met my gehuil. Becky en Luke het my gedurig 'n engel genoem, maar ek het gedink ek is dood en jy is die engel.

“Toe sheriff Foster my onder by tannie Batty se kothuis kom konfronteer en gedreig het dat hy my gaan dophou, het ek geweet die maskerade is verby. Dit was tyd om te gaan. Dit sou net 'n kwessie van tyd wees voordat die sheriff besef my identiteit is vervals. Ek kon jou egter nie verlaat nie, Eliza.

“Die ergste oomblik van almal was die dag toe ek uitgevind het my leuens verhoed dat jy en jou kinders hierdie plek kan erf. Matthew was doodseker dat sy pa sy testament verander het. Glo my, die laaste ding in die wêreld wat ek wou doen, was om hierdie boord van jou en jou kinders af weg te vat. Maar

dit is wat my leuens gedoen het.

“Ek wou dit alles aan jou verduidelik, maar ek het nie geweet hoe jy sou reageer nie. Ek het besluit om terug te gaan Washington toe en dinge te gaan regmaak, maar ons moes eers die oes inbring. Ek het bly hoop dat die sheriff my eers ná die oes sou ontdek, maar dit het nie so uitgewerk nie. Hy het teruggekom om my te arresteer. Nadat tannie Batty my gewaarsku het, het ek die geld gebruik wat ek uit my boemelaarstorie verdien het om terug te gaan Washington toe en myself oor te gee. Ek het nie geweet wat die gevolge sal wees nie, of ek tronk toe sou gaan omdat ek myself die hele tyd as Matthew Wyatt voorgedoen het of nie. Daarom het ek besluit om nie vir jou te skryf of jou te kontak totdat ek my naam gesuiwer het nie. Ek het jou lewe genoeg versuur met my leuens. Ek kon jou nie verder daarby betrek nie.

“Toe ek uiteindelik die gemors in Washington uitsorteer het, is ek terug New York toe om my familie te besoek. Hulle het reeds ’n brief van die weermag ontvang om te sê hulle het ’n fout gemaak; dus het hulle tyd gehad om gewoon te raak aan die idee dat ek teruggekeer het uit die graf. My pa het baie gereageer soos ek gedink het hy sou – hy was woedend omdat ek hom bedrieg het. Ek kon hom nie laat verstaan waarom ek dit gedoen het nie. As hy bly was om te hoor dat sy seun na al die jare nog leef, het hy dit nooit gewys nie. Ek was egter verbaas om te ontdek dat ek hom nie meer haat nie. Die maande wat ek hier saam met jou en tannie Batty deurgebring het, het my verander. Ek kon nie vir julle vertel wie ek regtig is nie, maar ek het uiteindelik begin uitpluis wie ek regtig is.

“Ek het God nog altyd met my pa vergelyk as iemand wat almal beheer en manipuleer. Ek het gedink ek moet ook God se goedkeuring verdien en dat ek nooit heeltemal goed genoeg sal wees nie. Die dag toe ek egter die swaai vir Becky opgehang het, het tannie Batty daarna gewys en gesê: ‘Dit is presies hoe ons hemelse Vader is. Hy hou daarvan om dinge te doen wat aan sy kinders vreugde verskaf.’ Ek en sy het baie gesels terwyl ek aan haar kothuis gewerk het en sy het my gewys hoe om God se vergifnis te vind. Dit is hoekom ek my pa ... en myself kon vergewe.”

Gabe buk vooroor en brei sy sterk hande terwyl hy praat. “Ek het die gelukkigste maande van my lewe hier deurgebring, en ek wou nooit hier weggaan nie. Ek was egter bang om terug te kom, Eliza. Ek het nie geweet of jy my ooit sal kan vergewe nadat ek jou sommerso in die steek gelaat het nie. Ek is lief vir jou, en vir jou kinders en tannie Batty, en ek is vreeslik jammer dat ek julle almal seergemaak het. Ek sal jou nie blameer as jy my nie kan vergewe nie, maar – ”

Gabe kry nooit die kans om sy sin klaar te maak nie. Ek is in sy arms en

soen hom, sê op die beste manier wat ek kan dat ek hom liefhet en hom vergewe.

Die heel wonderlikste Kersgeskenk waarvoor ek en die kinders ooit kon wens, het huis toe gekom om vir altyd by ons te bly.

## EPILOGUE

*Spring 1932*

We all got out of bed early that fine spring morning—probably because we were all too excited to sleep—and we hurried to finish our chores so we could get an early start on our trip. I cooked breakfast and Aunt Batty packed us a picnic lunch and Becky was feeding Winky, Queen Esther, and Arabella when she made an amazing discovery.

“Mama! Daddy! Come look! Arabella has kittens!” Gabe had just come in from the barn with the boys and didn’t even have his coat off yet. Becky called him “Daddy” so easily—all the kids did—ever since the day Gabe and I were married, four months ago. Aunt Batty and I still called him “Gabe” out of habit, but he said he liked that name best of all because it was his writing name. Batty lived in the farmhouse with us all the time now, and she let Gabe use her cottage to write his books.

“Don’t tell me,” Gabe said as he hung up his coat, “Have you and Aunt Batty been knitting again?”

“No, Daddy, they’re *real*kitties! Come look!”

We all dropped what we were doing and went to look at Arabella’s nest behind the stove. Sure enough, curled up beside the cat and all the mitten-kittens Aunt Batty had knit, were two tiny newborn kittens with orange and white stripes. They looked just like Arabella.

Aunt Batty’s eyes were as huge as saucers. “Where on earth did *they* come from?” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, where did those kittens come from, Mama?” Luke asked.

Gabe and I looked at each other and smiled. We would have to explain a few things to them, especially since they'd be having a new baby brother or sister next fall. But we didn't have time for long explanations that morning.

"They came from God," I said simply. "That's where every good gift comes from. Now, come on, let's eat up. We'll have to get a move on if we're going to make it to the circus on time."

This day my dream would finally come true. We would have to drive more than fifty miles to where the Bennett Brothers' Circus was performing, but the trip would be worth every mile. I'd told Gabe and the kids all about Daddy and Aunt Peanut and Charlie and Zippy and the Gambrini family, and they could hardly wait to meet them all.

When we arrived at the fairgrounds later that afternoon, I felt like I'd come home. Everything was wonderfully familiar, from the patched-up sideshow tent to the warble of the calliope and the smell of cotton candy. By the time we'd parked the truck, the first performance was about to begin, so we quickly bought tickets and went straight inside the Big Top. Gabe held Becky on his lap, and he let the boys gorge themselves on cotton candy and Cracker Jack.

"They'll have a tummy ache for sure," I warned him.

"Aw, it's only once a year," Gabe said.

The kids were amazed when they saw the towering clown on stilts—and even more amazed when I proudly told them, "That's your granddaddy!" Tears filled my eyes as I watched my daddy perform. I'd watched him perform hundreds of times before, of course, but that day I saw for the very first time how good he was at making people laugh, how much he loved the work he did, and how much the audience loved him.

When the show ended, I led everybody inside the sideshow tent. I felt a little nervous about how my daddy would react after all this time, but I knew Aunt Peanut would welcome me home with open



arms—and she did. In fact, everybody in the whole sideshow had gathered around me to hug me and meet my family, and the ticket hawker had to stop letting paying customers inside. Nobody wanted to pay to see a midget, an albino, a tattooed snake woman, and a rubber lady all bawling their eyes out. The only ones who stayed dry-eyed were the two-headed calf and the Abominable Snowman.

I finally got up my courage to ask Aunt Peanut about my father. “How’s Daddy? Is he mad at me for leaving him like I did? Do...do you think he’ll want to see me?”

“*Madat* you! Want to *seeyou*... !” she sputtered. “Oh, honey, this is the answer to all his prayers! Come on.” She took me by the hand and dragged me out the rear door.

“Your father cried like a baby the night you left,” Aunt Peanut said as we crossed the grass to the pad room. “When he ran back to his rail car after the performance and your mama told him you were gone, he put his face in his hands and sobbed. The only other time I ever saw Henry cry like that was when I showed him the letter you sent to me in Georgia. He wouldn’t give that letter back to me, you know. He still carries it around with him.”

The tent flap was open and I saw Daddy in his baggy trousers and floppy shoes, talking to Charlie. Charlie saw me first, and when his jaw dropped open in astonishment, Daddy whirled around to see why. I think he expected to see Gunther’s tigers on the loose from the stunned look on Charlie’s face. When he saw me instead, he looked every bit as stunned as Charlie.

“*Eliza?*” Daddy staggered to one side, like his legs were about to give out. I ran to him.

“Daddy!”

We clung to each other as if neither one of us wanted to let go. I inhaled his wonderfully familiar scent, a mixture of greasepaint and the Macassar oil he still used on his hair.

“Daddy, this is my family,” I said when I could talk again. “This is my husband, Gabe, and this is Jimmy, Luke, and Becky Jean...and this is our Aunt Batty.”

Daddy smiled as he shook Gabe’s hand. He pulled a quarter out of each of the kids’ ears and ruffled their hair. “These two have Yvette’s hair,” he murmured when he got to Luke and Becky.

“Yes, but Luke has your smile—don’t you think so, Daddy?”

“Just as long as none of them inherits my nose!” he said, honking his phony red one.

We had a lot of catching up to do. Charlie couldn’t wait to take Gabe and the kids to meet Zippy, and Aunt Batty and Aunt Peanut hit it off from the start, chattering away like two long-lost friends. Daddy and I finally had a moment alone.

“I’ve missed you, Eliza,” he said. I could see the love in his eyes, even though he would never be able to find the words to say it.

“I’ve missed you, too, Daddy.”

“Are you remembering to go to church every Sunday?” he asked gruffly. “Are you living by the Good Book?”

“Yes, I’m trying to. Aunt Batty is teaching me how.”

Daddy’s eyes filled with tears as he took both of my hands in his. “You look happy, Eliza. You know, that’s all I ever wanted for you. That’s all I ever dreamed of for you—that you would be happy.”

Tears streaked his white makeup as they spilled down his face, and I realized that I didn’t want his greasepaint to wash off. I loved my father’s silly, smiling clown face most of all.

When I thought about happiness it wasn’t the orchard or the big white house with the green shutters that I pictured—or any of the other things that had once seemed so important to me. I thought of my family—my circus family and my new family—and I smiled through my tears.

“Yes, Daddy. I’m very, very happy.”



# ~ Epiloog ~

*Lente 1932*

Ons almal staan dié lenteoggend vroeg op – waarskynlik omdat ons te opgewonde is om te slaap – en ons maak vinnig ons werkies klaar sodat ons vroeg in die pad kan val.

Ek maak onthyt en tannie Batty pak ’n piekniekmandjie vir middagete. Becky gee vir Winky, Queen Esther en Arabella kos toe sy iets ongeloofliks ontdek.

“Mamma! Pappa! Kom kyk. Arabella het kleintjies.” Gabe het pas saam met die seuns van die skuur af ingekom en het nog sy jas aan. Becky noem hom so gemaklik “Pappa” – soos Jimmy en Luke ook – van die dag af toe ek en Gabe vier maande gelede getroud is. Ek en tannie Batty noem hom uit gewoonte nog steeds “Gabe”, maar hy sê hy hou die meeste van dié naam omdat dit sy skrywersnaam is. Tannie Batty bly nou permanent saam met ons in die plaashuis en sy laat Gabe toe om haar kothuis te gebruik om boeke te skryf.

“Moenie vir my sê nie,” sê Gabe toe hy sy jas ophang. “Het jy en tannie Batty al weer gebrei?”

“Nee, Pappa, dit is régte katjies. Kom kyk!”

Ons almal los alles waarmee ons besig is en gaan kyk na Arabella se nes agter die stoof. Sowaar, opgekrul langs die kat en al die wolkatjies wat tannie Batty gebrei het, is twee klein pasgebore katjies met oranje en wit strepe. Hulle lyk net soos Arabella.

Tannie Batty se oë is so groot soos pierings. “Waar op aarde kom hulle vandaan?” vra sy.

“Ja, waar kom daardie katjies vandaan, Mamma?” vra Luke.

Ek en Gabe kyk na mekaar en glimlag. Ons sal ’n paar dinge vir hulle moet verduidelik, veral aangesien hulle volgende herfs ’n nuwe bababoetie of -sussie gaan kry. Ons het egter nie vanoggend tyd vir lang verduidelikings nie.

“Hulle kom van God af,” sê ek. “Dit is waar elke goeie gawe vandaan kom. Kom nou, laat ons eet. Ons moet in die pad val as ons betyds by die sirkus wil wees.”

Vandag gaan my droom uiteindelik waar word. Ons moet meer as tagtig kilometer ry tot waar die Bennett Brothers-sirkus optree, maar dit sal elke kilometer werd wees. Ek het Gabe en die kinders alles oor Pappa en tannie

Peanut en Charlie en Zippy en die Gambrini-familie vertel, en hulle kan skaars wag om almal te ontmoet.

Toe ons later die middag by die skougronde aankom, voel dit of ek terug is by die huis. Alles is wonderlik bekend, van die gelapte byvertonings se tent tot die klank van die stoomorrel en die reuk van spookasem. Teen die tyd dat ons die bakkie parkeer het, is die eerste vertoning op die punt om te begin. Ons koop haastig kaartjies en gaan reguit by die groot markiestent in. Gabe laat vir Becky op sy skoot sit en hy laat die seuns toe om hulle trommeldik te eet aan spookasem en Cracker Jack.

“Hulle gaan maagpyn kry,” waarsku ek hom.

“Ag, dit gebeur net een keer ’n jaar,” sê Gabe.

Die kinders is verstom toe hulle die lang nar op die stelte sien, en nog meer verstom toe ek trots vir hulle sê: “Dit is julle oupa.” My oë skiet vol tranes terwyl ek kyk hoe my pa sy vertoning doen. Ek het hom dit natuurlik al honderde kere tevore sien doen, maar vandag sien ek vir die eerste keer hoe goed hy is daarmee om mens te laat lag, hoe lief hy vir sy werk is en hoe baie die gehoor van hom hou.

Toe die vertoning verby is, lei ek almal na die byvertoning se tent. Ek voel ’n bietjie senuweeagtig oor hoe my pa gaan reageer, maar ek weet tannie Peanut sal my met ope arms ontvang – en dit is presies wat sy doen. Om die waarheid te sê, almal in die byvertoning kom nader om my ’n drukkie te gee en my gesin te ontmoet, en die kaartjieverkoper moet vir eers die betalende sirkusgangers buite hou. Niemand wil betaal om te sien hoe ’n dwerg, ’n albino, ’n slangvrou vol tatoeëermerke en ’n rubbervrou hulle oë uithuil nie. Die enigstes wat nie huil nie, is die tweekop-kalf en die afskuwelike sneeumens.

Ek skraap uiteindelik genoeg moed bymekaar om tannie Peanut oor my pa uit te vra. “Hoe gaan dit met Pappa? Is hy kwaad omdat ek hom sommerso verlaat het? Sal hy my wil sien?”

“Kwaad vir jou! Jou wil sien ... !” stotter sy. “Ag, liefie, dit is die antwoord op al my gebede. Kom saam.” Sy vat my aan die hand en trek my by die agterdeur uit.

“Jou pa het soos ’n baba gehuil die aand toe jy hier weg is,” sê tannie Peanut terwyl ons oor die gras na die kleedkamers loop. “Toe hy ná die vertoning terughardloop na sy kompartement toe en jou mamma hom vertel dat jy weg is, het hy sy kop in sy hande laat sak en gesnik soos hy huil. Die enigste ander keer wat ek Henry so sien huil het, was toe ek vir hom die brief gewys het wat jy vir my Georgia toe gestuur het. Hy wou daardie brief nie vir my teruggee nie. Hy dra dit nog steeds saam met hom rond.”

Die tentflap is oop en ek sien Pappa met sy los broek en oorgroot skoene aan waar hy met Charlie staan en gesels. Charlie sien my eerste en toe sy mond verbaas oopval, draai Pappa om sodat hy kan sien wat aangaan. Te oordeel na die verbaasde kyk op Charlie se gesig het hy seker verwag om te sien dat Gunther se tiere uit hulle hok gekom het.

“Eliza?” Pappa steier kant toe, asof sy bene onder hom gaan ingee. Ek hardloop na hom toe.

“Pappa!”

Ons klou aan mekaar vas asof nie een van ons ooit wil laat los nie. Ek asem sy wonderlik bekende geur in, ’n mengsel van grimeersel en die makassarolie wat hy nog steeds vir sy hare gebruik.

“Pappa, dit is my gesin,” sê ek toe ons weer kan praat. “Dit is my man, Gabe, en dit is Jimmy, Luke en Becky Jean. En dit is ons tannie Batty.”

Pappa glimlag toe hy Gabe se hand skud. Hy haal ’n muntstuk agter elke kind se oor uit en vryf hulle hare deurmekaar. “Hierdie twee het Yvette se hare,” sê hy sag toe hy by Luke en Becky kom.

“Ja, maar Luke het Pappa se glimlag, nè?”

“Net solank nie een van hulle my neus erf nie,” sê hy en druk sy rooi neus se toeter.

Ons het baie om in te haal. Charlie kan nie wag om Gabe en die kinders te vat om vir Zippy te ontmoet nie, en tannie Batty en tannie Peanut hou sommer dadelik van mekaar en gesels soos twee langverlore vriende. Dan het ek en Pappa uiteindelik ’n oomblik alleen.

“Ek het jou gemis, Eliza,” sê hy. Ek kan die liefde in sy oë sien, selfs al sal hy nooit die woorde kan sê nie.

“Ek het Pappa ook gemis.”

“Onthou jy nog om elke Sondag kerk toe te gaan?” vra hy kwaai. “Leef jy volgens die Goeie Boek?”

“Ja, ek probeer. Tannie Batty leer my hoe.”

Pappa se oë skiet vol tranen toe hy my hande vat. “Jy lyk gelukkig, Eliza. Jy weet tog dit is al wat ek ooit vir jou wou gehad het. Dit is al waarom ek vir jou gedroom het ... dat jy gelukkig sal wees.”

Die tranen wat oor sy wange loop, los ’n spoor in die wit grimeersel en ek besef ek wil nie hê sy gesigverf moet afwas nie. Ek is van alles die heel liefste vir my pa se simpel, glimlaggende nargesig.

Wanneer ek aan geluk dink, is dit nie die boord of die groot wit huis of die groen luike wat ek sien nie; ook nie een van die ander dinge wat eens op ’n tyd vir my so belangrik was nie. Ek dink aan my familie – my sirkusfamilie en my nuwe familie – en ek glimlag deur my tranen.

“Ja, Pappa. Ek is baie, baie gelukkig.”

Ons hoor graag wat jy dink van hierdie boek!

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